THE PEOPLE WANT TO TOPPLE THE SYSTEM:
AN ALTERNATIVE NARRATIVE OF THE ARAB UPRISINGS

A Thesis
submitted to the Faculty of the
Graduate School of Arts and Sciences
of Georgetown University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
degree of
Master of Arts
in Arab Studies

By
Sarah Mousa, B.A.

Washington, D.C.
April 14, 2014
Acknowledgments

I would like to express my gratitude to Georgetown University’s Center for Contemporary Arab Studies for providing the funding to support my research in Tunisia and Egypt. I would also like to thank my thesis committee: Professor Elliott Colla, Professor Rochelle Davis, and Professor Joseph Sassoon for their comments and suggestions throughout the process. This thesis would not have been possible without the activists who generously lent me their time and patience during interviews and demonstrations. Finally, I am grateful to the many family, friends and classmates who provided me with input throughout the research and writing process.
# Table of Contents

Introduction ........................................................................................................................................... 1

Chapter I: Literature and Methodology ........................................................................................... 7
  I.A: Introduction .............................................................................................................................. 7
  I.B: “Strategic Narratives” and Popular Terminology ................................................................. 7
  I.C: Political and Economic Analysis ............................................................................................ 13
  I.D: The Arab Uprisings as a Social Movement ......................................................................... 22
  I.E: Thesis Questions and Methodology ....................................................................................... 26

Chapter II: Tunisian Student Protest ............................................................................................... 30
  II.A: Introduction .......................................................................................................................... 30
  II.B: Background: Overview of the General Union of Tunisian Students ............................... 30
  II.C: Case: General Union of Tunisian Students 2013 Protest ................................................ 33
  II.D: Analysis ............................................................................................................................... 41
  II.E: Conclusion ........................................................................................................................... 47

Chapter III: Nakba Commemoration .............................................................................................. 49
  III.A: Introduction ....................................................................................................................... 49
  III.B: Background: Palestinian Activism in Egypt ..................................................................... 49
  III.C: Case: 2013 Nakba Commemoration ................................................................................. 54
  III.D: Analysis ............................................................................................................................. 61
  III.E: Conclusion .......................................................................................................................... 65

Chapter IV: Downtown Cairo Street Art ......................................................................................... 67
  IV.A: Introduction .......................................................................................................................... 67
  IV.B: Background I: Art and Politics ............................................................................................ 68
  IV.C: Background II: Ammar Abo Bakr ...................................................................................... 73
  IV.D: Background III: Mohamed Mahmoud Street .................................................................... 74
  IV.E: Case: Downtown Cairo Street Art ...................................................................................... 77
  IV.F: Analysis ............................................................................................................................... 88
  IV.G: Conclusion .......................................................................................................................... 95

Conclusion ............................................................................................................................................ 98

Appendix ............................................................................................................................................ 101

Bibliography ..................................................................................................................................... 102
Introduction

Since the toppling of Tunisian President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, a one-dimensional narrative of the Arab Uprisings has become axiomatic in both foreign and Arab spheres. This mainstream account paints the movement as one for Western-style democracy and discursively associated economic neoliberalism. The explanation has dominated the representation of the events of the Uprisings in many academic fields (especially political science), in the publications of policy research institutions as well as in the coverage of corporate media. The narrative is thoroughly modernist in ideology, by which I mean that it sets for the Arab world a teleological path to a kind of progress that emulates that of Western industrialized nations.

In challenging this mainstream narrative, I have found it useful to employ the term *imperial continuity* as developed by Edward Said.1 By this, I seek to point out how, this narrative of the 2011 Uprisings depicts Western states and agencies as if they were “at a distance” rather than intimately involved in the governance of the regimes targeted by protest. In this way, the narrative sought to portray Arab regimes as autonomous rather than client states, and to suggest that protesters rose neither against the West (the United States and Israel especially) nor Western-allied Arab foreign policy, but rather against localized forms of brutality and corruption that had no clear connection to Western

---

1 In describing the state of the region, Edward Said points to an *imperial continuity* “that begins with Ottoman rule over the Arabs in the 16th century until our own time.” He explicitly points to the United States and Israel as contemporary imperialist forces.


The imperialist foot-print on the Arab world is well-documented elsewhere:
states.\(^2\) By narrating the events in this way—and by conceptually severing the ties between imperial powers and local clients—analysts could then suggest that global powers, like the United States, could play a helpful role during a transition process.\(^3\) The problem of this narrative, of course, is that it effectively argues for continuing the same old system of governance, though now in the name of change, transition, and solidarity with the revolutions that sought to overturn the very system.

This one-dimensional narrative on the Uprisings not only obfuscates but also undermines the account that was put forth by activists themselves and that resonated so widely with diverse sectors of Arab populations. My thesis will explore a narrative of the Arab Uprisings as put forth by activists. Through their demonstrations and protest materials, activists build a *contentious identity*.\(^4\) This constructed *identity* points to an overarching movement goal that has been largely overlooked: to unravel a historically-rooted system of power relations that spans global and local scales, with intertwined political, economic and socio-cultural facets.

In elaborating on *imperial continuity*, Edward Said argues that in its most basic form, it is a system that occurs at the global scale and holds at the core a socio-cultural imagining of native backwardness.\(^5\) Foreign political actors transfer this notion of native

---


4 As Charles Tilly and Sidney Tarrow develop the concept, briefly: Contentious actors’ self-identification formed relationally against their perception of the attributes that constitute the identity of the target power source. (See: Tilly, Charles and Sidney Tarrow. “How Political Identities Work.” December 2005. <http://government.arts.cornell.edu/assets/faculty/docs/tarrow/identity_work.pdf>)

inadequacy to the population itself, by means of cultural hegemony. These actors use the notion of native inadequacy as a tool to justify political and economic intervention. They use economic intervention as a means for exploitation, and facilitate the process by coopting a stratum of local political elite, which benefits from the process and is socio-economically set apart from the rest of the population. The foreign political actors and this stratum of local political elite in turn further perpetuate socio-cultural imaginings that underpin the system. Said identifies an important aspect of this system as fragmentation among the Arab people—geographically, politically, economically and socially. Essentially, the colonial tactic of “divide-and-rule.” In all, this system allows for the management, control and manipulation of the Other, “politically, sociologically, militarily, ideologically, scientifically, and imaginatively”.

Temporally, Said traces this pattern of power relations, what he calls a “clear line of imperial continuity”, to Ottoman rule over the Arab people, followed by British, French and now American and Israeli influence. While the actors and the details of the system change over time—today it is masked in the promotion of norms of free expression, political democracy and economic neo-liberal orthodoxies—the pattern of relations remains constant. On the contemporary form of these power relations, Said writes: “The Arab people today face a wholesale attack on their future by an imperial power, America, that acts in concert with Israel, to pacify, subdue, and finally reduce us to a bunch of warring fiefdoms whose first loyalty is not to their people but to the great superpower

---

6 Hegemony, here, is used in the Gramscian sense, briefly: when political actors or social classes extend control by spreading ideology and eliciting tacit consent rather than using brute force. (See: Williams, Raymond. Marxism and Literature. Oxford University Press: 1977.

(and its local surrogate) itself." Here, Said highlights the role of fragmentation as a key part of enforcing hegemony.

Throughout time, Arab activists have attempted to resist this system of power, although, given its reach and history, such resistance is not easy. Nor is it straightforward; resistance to such a layered and variegated power formation must be relational. In this sense, it takes form as opposition to a status quo. This diametric counter-formation emphasizes the value of socio-cultural traditions, the need for political and economic independence and socio-economic justice. The counter-formation is populist rather than elitist, local rather than foreign. It celebrates ideals of pan-Arabism, to resist fragmentation imposed by foreign actors and local colluders. This broad set of notions emerged within the context of mid-twentieth century liberation struggles in the Arab world. It remains to mark an Arab repertoire of contention. 

My thesis argues that contemporary Arab Uprising activists pulled from this repertoire, to form a contentious identity that suitably targeted the same set of power relations—between foreign actors and the Arab people, between Arab political elite and the general population—that has permeated the Arab world for decades, at the least. I consider three cases of activism that might be fairly said to be part of the Uprisings of 2011: a Tunisian student union protest in 2013, an Egyptian commemoration of the 1948 Palestinian Nakba in 2013, and the murals of an Egyptian protest artist painted in 2012 and 2013. I selected these cases because they each explicitly point to some aspect of a shared, broad contentious identity.

---

9 As Charles Tilly develops the concept, briefly: A past set of protest mechanisms and materials that contentious actors borrow from and develop upon.
While each of these three demonstrations arose in response to local events—the assassination of a political leader, the marginalization of a rural refugee population, and the killing of protesters—and according to local idioms of identity and resistance, they each also place themselves within a broader narrative. The demonstrations all draw on strategies, symbols, and references that clearly show a consciousness of struggle, and history of activism, shared across national borders. By employing a shared, transnational repertoire of contention, these cases suggest that the Uprisings of 2011 might be fairly called by the single name, “Arab revolution.”

Nonetheless, to do so would necessitate some qualifications—starting with the fact that the Uprisings were by no means driven by a pan-Arab ideology along the lines of Nasserism or Baathism. Likewise, it is crucial to recall that the Uprisings were driven by local concerns and histories rather than a single cause. This dynamic—the way in which actors revolted against local forms of oppression but also consistently reached for repertoires that were regional (rather than purely local) and drew upon networks and strategies that were Arab (rather than merely national)—indicates our need for a more nuanced narrative of how the Uprisings of 2011 constituted an event of Arab history.

Methodologically, this thesis uses ethnographic observations and interviews, contextualized within historical, political, economic and social conditions. The theoretical approach of this thesis draws concepts from social movement theory: contentious identity and the repertoire of contention. The two notions serve as useful tools to develop an understanding of the wider implications of each of the three selected contentious performances. At the core, the Arab Uprisings are an ongoing battle over a narrative. Even as demonstrators act to break a system of power relations, the story of their actions
is usurped and recast—their potential to cause fundamental change limited. Left unchanged, the existing system of power will continue to spark resistance, as it has in the past.
Chapter I: Literature and Methodology

I.A Introduction
This Chapter reviews literature on the Arab Uprisings and presented the main questions that this thesis aims to address, along with methodology. A recurrent pattern is evident in the literature considered in this section: a mainstream narrative of the Uprisings emerged among prominent political figures, media and academics. A number of scholars and activists present a rejection of this narrative, and suggest an opposing alternative. The axiomatic narrative on the Uprisings, that the movement emerged for democracy and further economic liberalization, is tied to structuralist and macro-level approaches, modernist conceptions, and non-primary source research. The rejection of the narrative is often constructivist; it is especially salient in socio-cultural research, and works that involve qualitative research focused on contentious actions and actors. My thesis poses questions that draw from Social Movement Theory (SMT) concepts and seek to illuminate the macro-grievances of the Uprisings. It employs ethnographic observations of contentious performances and interviews with activists in order to answer those questions.

I.B “Strategic Narratives” and Popular Terminology

Over the past three years, there has been a plethora of largely macro-level productions on the Arab Uprisings, aimed at defining and explaining their causes, grievances, aspirations and impact. Drawing from international relations theory, researchers including Ben O’Loughlin and Monroe Price refer to these explanations as strategic narratives—“state-led projections of a sequence of events and identities, a tool through
which political leaders try to give meaning to past, present and future,”10 and construct the context and justification for political actions.11 This conception notably emphasizes the role of the state in generating and propagating narratives.12 Similarly to aspects of Social Movement Theory, which analogize protests to theatrical routines,13 strategic narratives are described in performance rhetoric: they are the scripts, written by authors, which set the framework within which actors must perform.14 This script includes an anticipated conclusion, and is central to shaping the final outcome.15

Titles attributed to the Uprisings—such as the American-rooted Arab Spring, Arab Awakening, or Facebook Revolution16 or the Iranian-rooted Islamic Awakening17—are revealing of the extent to which single terms, imbued with entire narratives, can be politically contentious and consequential.18 Rami Khouri argues that the term Arab Spring, for which Marc Lynch claims credit,19 masks a set of ontological approaches to the region associated with a Western interest in maintaining relations of domination with

the Arab world. Specifically, Khouri, as well as Ramzy Baroud, suggests that the term denies Arab populations agency, and renders them docile and thus manipulatable for Western strategic and economic interests: “Revolutionary, self-assertive Arabs frighten many people abroad. Softer Arabs who sway with the seasons and the winds may be more comforting.”

Beyond this, James Gelvin and Joseph Massad argue that the term sets the stage for a particular narrative by evoking the legacy of past Springs. Gelvin traces the term to a number of events that occurred in the context of George W. Bush’s Freedom Agenda, such as the relatively-free 2005 parliamentary elections in Egypt, Beirut protests, or Bashar Al-Assad’s Damascus Spring (and indeed Lynch himself references these events when reintroducing the term in the context of 2011 Uprisings). These Springs were mostly brief state-led efforts at superficial reform. Massad traces the etymological origin of the term to Eastern European movements that consisted of top-down political and economic liberalization reforms. By employing this term in the case of the Arab Uprisings, a narrative is set, others are concealed, and a teleological path to progress is determined, setting the tone for acceptable political actions. Further, Baroud argues that the term Spring suggests temporal limitations; indeed, since their early stages the Uprisings have morphed, according to a narrative emanating from the field of American

policy, into an Arab *Fall* or *Winter* marked by chaos and terror.\(^{24}\)

The term *Arab Awakening* has similarly been critiqued for its orientalist connotations of a dormant, stagnant population in dire need of modernization.\(^{25}\) Tariq Ramadan suggests that Awakening refers to an Arab realization of Western values:

> Arab peoples, primarily Muslims, were rising up without violence in the name of the very same values “we” hold dear, the Western values of freedom, justice, and democracy... Their resemblance came at the price of deleting their religious beliefs and practices, their culture and even their history... At last they had overcome their backwardness and strode in lockstep with the West in its enlightened march of progress.\(^{26}\)

On the other end of the spectrum, and illustrative of Ramadan’s critique, David Gardener\(^{27}\) and Deniz Kandiyoti\(^{28}\) suggest the inadequacy of the term Awakening, as Arabs have not fully awakened to Western values such as minority rights and gender equality. Claims on the centrality of technology in the Uprisings, notably purported by media focus on figures like Wael Ghoneim and his deterministic attribution of Facebook as the enabler of the revolution,\(^{29}\) further bolster this modernist narrative. Martin Bunton suggests that the technology focus overlooks the mobilizing role of factors ranging from labor groups to mosques and Friday prayers in favor of an image of dormant Arabs awaken only by Western technology and the Western ideals which that technology

The descriptive utilization of *Arab* has also been crucial in constructing the narrative of the Uprisings as a single movement, or alternatively has been rejected in favor of a separatist account of the protests as national movements with joint inspiration. Baroud criticizes the term Arab as reductionist, and for its implication that the entire region would, or should, experience similar upheavals. Lisa Anderson recognizes joint inspiration yet criticizes the term for its suggestion that Arab populations shared similar grievances and instead points to variation in government shortcomings that make the Uprisings purely national.

As opposed to Anderson’s structuralist approach, Massad examines the appropriateness of the term from the vantage point of the movement’s mobilizers: “those staging the Uprisings saw themselves as reconnecting with other Arabs and ending the isolationism of country-specific nationalisms that the dictators promoted.” Unlike the terms Spring and Awakening, the descriptive *Arab* is not rooted primarily in Western discourse, but rather was propagated in the framing mechanisms of activists themselves, and notably by the satellite channel AlJazeera, and was important particularly to the early formation of the movement. Aref Hijjawi, an AlJazeera Arabic Program Director, clearly articulated the network’s intent to impact events of the Uprisings, while maintaining factual accuracy, by framing it for a pan-Arab audience (although he makes reservations

---

on the causal role of any media in spurring protest, including AlJazeera).34

Within the Arab public sphere, the narrative of the movement has been formed, reformed, contested and usurped by various groups with conflicting interests. In an attempt to suppress the Uprisings, several Arab governments and affiliated media have at some point described the protests as terroristic attacks carried out by thugs serving foreign interests.35 To seemingly exonerate itself, the Syrian government blamed the Tunisian and Egyptian Uprisings on those governments’ Western-allied foreign policy,36 then adopted and exaggerated the terrorism narrative used by other governments once protests began in Syria.37 Post-9/11 US propaganda linking Islam to terrorism has been skillfully adopted by many of these governments, exploiting Islamist involvement to undermine opposition.38 These explanations have been employed with varying degrees depending on government and the temporal situation.

In cases such as Tunisia and Egypt, where the Uprisings drove the resignation of presidents, many of the Western-rooted, modernist terms and associated narratives used to define the Uprisings have become dominant in media and public debate.39 While epithets are sometimes transferred with caution—by the use of phrases such as the so-

called Arab Spring rather than simply Arab Spring—the associated narratives and the vague political and economic path they lay for progress have become accepted. As the cosmetic changes fail to satisfy demands, counter-revolutionary forces extend the narrative of an Arab Fall, blaming chaos on popular mobilization. In Egypt, the two narratives exist side-by-side, in an effort that has thus far maintained a status quo of political and economic power relations. The impact of the narratives on the political trajectory of these countries since the fall of Zine El Abidine Ben Ali and Hosni Mubarak is salient. The terminology of Western-style democracy and economic liberalization has come hand in hand with the implementation of procedural aspects of democracy, with particular focus on elections (picturesque periods recalling images of Iraqi elections following the American invasion).40

I.C Political and Economic Analysis

Prior to the Arab Uprisings, political science literature focused overwhelmingly on the persistence of authoritarian systems and figures in the Arab world, and the contingencies of power transition in the case of aging leaders. The Uprisings spurred epistemological debate among political scientists on the field itself and the failure of Middle East-specialists to identify the potential for the individual agency of grassroots movements to affect change in political systems. The structuralist approach dominating the field has been questioned for its presuppositions of relations between outcomes and institutions, and normative claims.41

Political scientists focusing on the Arab world identified a number of major issues in the methodological approach to the region that may have contributed to myopic analysis. These include: 1) large-scale hypothesis-testing that presents correlation between given factors and outcomes but fails to detail the nature of this relationship, and 2) a focus on macrostructures, identified as the key determinants of political conditions, as opposed to micro-level institutional and non-institutional features. This approach prominently identified Arab authoritarianism as exceptionally durable due to a number of causal factors, among them the unique acquiescent and apathetic nature of Arab populations. While this focus on authoritarian resilience has fallen under criticism, post-Uprising literature remains driven by hypothesis-testing, albeit now to identify institutional factors contributing to non-durability and mass protest. Ironically, some of these factors, such as military coercion, are used to explain both of these opposite outcomes.

As the Uprisings unfolded several political scientists, some of who rejected their own past approach and conclusions, contended that structuralist methodologies are unlikely to provide satisfactory explanations of Arab politics. These academics proposed a number of alternatives, including: 1) a shift away from a purely structuralist, hypothesis-driven approach to an incorporation of constructivist paradigms, which argue that institutions are socially constructed and incorporate qualitative methods to understand phenomenon.

---


rather than aim to statistically prove or disprove a hypothesis\textsuperscript{45} 2) adding to quantitative analysis a more holistic approach which incorporates qualitative methods, and considers historical, social and cultural components\textsuperscript{46} 3) a focus on micro-level factors such as particular population segments, spatial areas, or topical issues, with attention to interactions between institutions and society in an effort to better explain macro-level phenomena\textsuperscript{47} 4) an avoidance of explaining the region to a Western audience in terms accessible to them yet regionally irrelevant, and increased attempt to explain Arab politics using local perceptions.\textsuperscript{48} Political scientists further identified major topics that were overlooked pre-Uprisings, such as inter-Arab relations on both the political and social levels\textsuperscript{49} and social movements, particularly non-Islamist ones, and their relation to political structures and conditions.\textsuperscript{50}

Much of what has been produced on the intertwined political and economic grievances of the Uprisings is unresponsive to these shortcomings. The mainstream explanatory narrative that has emerged both in academia and popular media is markedly modernist; it attributes the Uprisings to a popular desire for democratic systems and

\textsuperscript{47} Jamal, Manal. Approach and Substance in Middle East Political Science.” Middle East Political Science. June 12, 2012.
\textsuperscript{50} Jamal, Manal. Approach and Substance in Middle East Political Science.” Middle East Political Science. June 12, 2012.
\textsuperscript{50} Lawrence, Adria. “The Arab Spring and New Approaches to Social Movement Research.” Middle East Political Science. June 12, 2012.
economic liberalization, the two of which have been discursively intertwined. Some have argued that in recent decades democracy has been increasingly used as a euphemism for economic liberalization. This phenomenon is closely associated with the role of International Financial Institutions (IFIs) in many Arab economies. In recent decades IFIs have pressured Arab countries to implement neo-liberal policies, and since the 1990s have framed it as a complementary aspect to democracy promotion.

The International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank (WB) were founded in the context of World War II, by Allied nations, and were initially conceptualized as conduits for financial and commercial relations among industrialized countries, and for European reconstruction. Since then, these institutions remain dominated by Western powers, while their mandates have expanded significantly to include the development of the post-colonial world. In the 1980s, the role of IFIs became particularly prominent in the Arab context. Economically, this coincided with the institutions’ adoption of neo-liberal orthodoxies, which theoretically claim that: “human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade.”

The Washington Consensus identifies the major structural reforms prescribed by neoliberalism, including: reduced fiscal spending, privatization, deregulation and trade liberalization.

Economic instability in many Arab countries increased the leverage of IFIs and Western powers in influencing macroeconomic and fiscal policy in a neoliberal vision, a condition of aid. An early Egyptian government compliance with an IMF agreement led

---

to a reduction of subsidies on basic foodstuffs, and on a popular level was met with the 1977 Bread Uprisings/Riots. The government revoked the subsidies, and delayed aspects of structural reform for the Mubarak government, which implemented major policy changes in 1991 and 2004.\textsuperscript{53} Over the following decades, effects of neo-liberal policies became apparent: 1) conditionality placed on aid, a cyclical reliance on imports and associated rise in debt compromised national sovereignty, 2) trade liberalization weakened national markets and bolstered consumerist tendencies furthering demand for imports, 3) privatization and the rise of politically-connected business classes enhanced state power and widened socio-economic disparities, 4) inflation led to a dramatic decline in real wages, particularly in the public sector and 5) the promises of export-led growth never materialized due to a lack of competitive advantage.

In effect, neo-liberal reforms increased the economic power of Western governments over developing Arab countries, and of Arab governments and associated classes over the population. Samer Soliman draws parallels between Mubarak’s Egypt and that of Khedive Ismail, whose government’s debt was used as justification for British occupation of the country.\textsuperscript{54} IFIs and Western actors continued to push for neo-liberal reforms, increasingly by associating it with concepts of democratic governance, based on a theoretical assumption that neo-liberal reform democratizes access to resources, and thus is necessary for political democratization.

In the years preceding the Uprisings, many works emanating from IFIs not simply overlooked the major economic disparities that disadvantaged large sectors of Arab populations, but praised countries like Tunisia, Egypt and Syria for economic growth.


\textsuperscript{54} \textit{Ibid.}
Selective economic indicators, such as fiscal balance, were used to “diagnose a country’s fundamental condition” in a manner that painted an image of progress. Soliman argues that improvement in these indicators was often reflective of a period of increased aid rather than economic development. These institutions then credited the reforms for the economic growth that followed. For example, the 2010 IMF report for Egypt commends the government for its acceleration of structural reforms and resulting “rapid output growth.” These reports identified the diagnosis for persistent issues, such as unemployment, as further structural reform. In Egypt, State television and newspapers repeated the international organizations’ praise of economic plans and accomplishments to boost government credibility among the population. Paul Rivlin points to the paradoxes of neo-liberal policies in the Arab world: states use the policies to derive legitimacy from their role as interlocutors in the international economy, yet these same policies generate socio-economic disparities that undermine that legitimacy.

Adam Hanieh and Walter Ambrust demonstrate how IFIs and Western governments recast the narrative of political-economic development in the Arab world in the face of the 2011 Uprisings, in order to suit a continued push for neoliberal policies. IFIs and Western political actors identified deviation from the system, rather than the proper application of neoliberal orthodoxy, as the reason for economic disparities and

grievances.\textsuperscript{60} This narrative attributes the failure of recent economic reform to the corrupt behavior of political actors, reducing the problem to a matter of essential characteristics of Arab leadership.\textsuperscript{61} The anticipated conclusion of this narrative is that neoliberal reforms were simply misapplied, or incomplete, and need to be more aggressively pursued. Beyond this, democratic discourse has been so intertwined with concepts of neoliberalism that Western actors have been able to paint structural reform as imperative to a realization of the political demands of the Uprisings.\textsuperscript{62}

The prevalence of this narrative among foreign political actors is salient. Rather than examining the role of IFIs in Arab countries, World Bank President Robert Zoellick attributed Mohamed Bouazizi’s suicide to corruption and a lack of opportunity to start a business: “The late Mr. Bouazizi was basically driven to burn himself alive because he was harassed with red tape…One starting point is to quit harassing those people and let them have a chance to start some small businesses.”\textsuperscript{63} This rhetoric was tied to aid packages from international governments and financial institutions in the immediate aftermath of the Uprisings; in the case of Egypt, Hanieh considers such aid: “a conscious attempt to consolidate and reinforce the power of Egypt’s dominant class.”\textsuperscript{64} American promotion of “orderly transition” in Egypt entailed the acceleration of neoliberal reforms begun under Mubarak; aid packages conditioned structural adjustment. The extension of

\textsuperscript{61} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{64} Hanieh, Adam. “Egypt’s Orderly Transition: International Aid and the Rush to Structural Adjustment.” Jadaliyya. May 29, 2011.
loans, Hanieh claims, aimed to further entrench Egypt in a cycle of debt, via which Western powers ultimately extract more from the country than they lend.65

Another key strand of this narrative emphasizes the role of youth in the Uprisings. The high rate of unemployment among this population is identified as a main grievance, remediable by further economic liberalization. This mainstream narrative of democracy and neo-liberalism largely disregards the diverse socio-economic segments of the population that participated in the Uprisings, unable to account for their grievances. In the Arab sphere, protests by such segments are relegated outside of the context of the Uprisings, as separatist claims (*matalib fi’awiyya*).66

Phillip Rizk challenges the mainstream narrative on the Uprisings. He argues that media outlets have presented a significantly distorted depiction of the Arab Uprisings and their purpose, in part by selectively focusing on interlocutors who fit particular profiles—generally young, educated, internet-savvy, middle class—and use familiar political discourse for accessibility. The myriad of actors, from a wide range of social classes, and events, both non-violent and violent, that constituted the revolutions was glossed over in favor of picturesque and familiar images of the model demonstrator. Rizk argues that these views were propagated to avoid the reality of “a collectivist Uprising against a global system of domination.”67

Rizk writes that: “These discourses silenced the structural dimensions of injustice and concealed the role of neoliberal policies promoted by the likes of the IMF, the EU and the USA in deepening the stratification between poor and rich. They made you forget that it

is out of these structures of injustice that the desire for social justice is born in the first place. 68 He continues to argue that the dominating narratives, those of Western and Arab politically-powerful actors, localized the grievances of the Uprisings in order to isolate the problem and degrade it to an issue of a number of corrupt individuals. This narrative, Rizk says, allows for the persistence of the same logic of governance.

Rizk argues that this misrepresentation, which favored the voice of a few, essentially “drowned out the voices of the majority” and ignored the range of grievances driving protest. The horizontal structure of the movement with a non-centralized decision making process makes it impossible to tell the story of the revolution through a single image. People had a wide range of demands, there is no one reason they came out to protest: “different people rejected different faces of the same system of power that dominated our everyday lives.” Rizk identifies the effects of imperialism as driving forces for mobilization: “the effects of imperialism through the cloak of post-colonialism provoked people yet again into mass protest.” He argues that there is no ideology to the Uprisings, simply desperation and the unbearable weight of hypocrisy and circumstances; it was a reaction to ongoing repression of an entire population by a ruling elite. 69

Revolutionary goals and ideology developed, and continue to develop, through the exchange of ideas among those taking action. The call of the revolutions, “the people want the fall of the system,” suggested a desire to end the status quo. An inability to articulate the nature of change desired, Rizk argues, is not a weakness but rather

68 Ibid.
testimony to “a global crisis to imagine alternative forms of social organization to the neo-liberal state with its self- perpetuating, self-destructive stratification.”

Rizk’s narrative of the Uprisings attempts to account for the diversity in demonstrators and grievances throughout the region and across socio-economic boundaries. It allows space for the prominent role of non-youth, non-middle class actors. This includes labor movements, which swelled in recent decades and particularly in post-2004 Egypt with the accelerated implementation of neoliberal reforms. The activism corresponded with measures to privatize state industries, with the effect of disadvantaging labor forces by spurring layoffs, and lowering wages and benefits.

I.D The Arab Uprisings as a Social Movement

The Arab Uprisings have been analyzed within the framework of Social Movement Theory (SMT), as conceptualized by Charles Tilly and Lesely Wood and expounded upon by a number of scholars. Social movements are vehicles for a group to stake claims against a given target, an object of claim. Tilly and Wood identify three main components of a social movement: 1) a campaign, or sustained public effort of claim-making on specific targets (objects of claim), 2) the employment of political actions from a particular repertoire which includes street demonstrations and marching, pamphleteering and public meetings, and 3) concerted public displays of worthiness, unity, numbers and commitment (WUNC). A social movement links three parties: a claimant, an object of claim, and a public. It is the interaction between these parties and

70 Ibid.
72 Doug McAdam, Robert Benford, David Snow, William Gamson, David Meyer, Alden Morris and Suzanne Staggenborg
the existence of all three highlighted components that constitute a social movement.\textsuperscript{73} At the core of this definition of the social movement are claimants, and the claims that they make.

Tilly and Wood identify all three aspects of SMT in the Arab Uprisings, and define each country’s Uprising as a social movement. They suggest that each separate Uprising constituted 1) “a sustained campaign to influence the government” that 2) drew from a social movement repertoire that includes street demonstrations, pamphleteering, etc. and 3) incorporated WUNC displays. Tilly and Wood define the object of claim as the State,\textsuperscript{74} and the claim or demand as democracy and a solution to economic crisis.\textsuperscript{75} Tilly and Wood note that there was some coordination among activists on a global scale, and that individual Arab countries are now increasingly integrated into global economies, yet argue that activists conceive of their movements as occurring “within bounded countries”.\textsuperscript{76}

Tilly and Wood’s identification of objects of claim and claims within the Arab Uprisings is an extension of the mainstream narrative. This is unsurprising, as they base their suggestions almost entirely on Western media sources. The problematic aspects of this conceptualization of the Uprisings within SMT emanate not only from a failure to engage directly with activists and the content of their contentious performances, but also from a weakness of SMT itself. SMT was formulated on the basis of a number of cases that occurred in eighteenth-twentieth century Europe. The vastly different trajectory through which the nation-state emerged in the Arab world makes the notion that claim-
making occurs within bounded territories difficult to apply. In a region where the borders themselves were largely imposed by Western actors and colluding elites makes them, to some, a legacy of an imperial project to divide the region, rather than some organic movement that came as a result of local identity formation. Thus the notion of the nation-state is itself up for contention. In a theory where cultural performances are at the center, Arab culture’s transcendence of State boundaries makes it counter-intuitive to base an analysis on national borders.

Elliott Colla uses SMT’s concept of the *repertoire of contention*\(^{77}\)—a past set of performances from which activists borrow and expand upon—in his analysis of protest chants. Colla traces the way in which the Uprisings’ rallying call—“the people want to topple the regime”\(^{78}\)—emerged from Tunisia and spread to Egypt, and throughout the region. By alluding to lines of poetry, known to any educated Arab, and drawing from the tune of a familiar pan-Arab slogan, the chant gained resonance and enhanced mobilization throughout the region. The actual performance of the chant served to maintain morale in a highly contingent context. The allusion to the poem was in and of itself a contentious act, a repossession of lines used in public rituals and education systems that elucidates the gap between the words and their official performance.\(^{79}\) The

---

\(^{77}\) *Repertoire of contention*: a historical set of protests tools that activists draw from. Tilly posits: “forms of mobilization are learned routines that are rooted in particular cultural traditions.” Tilly draws on the theatrical concept of the repertory as a metaphor for contentious performances, presenting contentious actions as learned and dramatized for greater effect. The weakness of the metaphor, Tilly notes, stems from the fact that unlike highly scripted theatrical performances, participants in contentious actions (all parties, including claimants, objects of claim, and observers) learn as the process unfolds and adapt their methods accordingly, leaving room for innovation. (See: McAdam, Doug, Sidney Tarrow, and Charles Tilly. “Toward an Integrated Perspective on Social Movements and Revolutions.” In *Comparative Politics: Rationality, Culture, and Structure*, Ed. Mark Lichbach and Alan S. Zukerman Cambridge, 2007. and Tilly, Charles. *Contentious Performances*. Cambridge: 2008. Pg 14)

\(^{78}\) Alternatively: The people want to topple the system

existence of a shared cultural reserve among the Arab people, as Colla’s analysis highlights, makes it impossible to examine regional contentious performances as occurring within bounded nation-states.

My thesis takes particular interest in the SMT notion of contentious identity. As Tilly and Sidney Tarrow define it, this notion is the conglomeration of the various elements that define social movement actors, an “us”, against the elements that define an external force, the “them”. This notion of a contentious identity is relational. It involves a boundary: a separation between the claim-makers and their target, the objects of claim. Movements draw sharp lines between the two formations, as they call for an “us” to rise against “them.”

These boundaries not only define and separate the “us” and the “them”, but they expound upon the relationship between the two groups. Those on either side of the boundary, Tilly calls them X and Y, are characterized by a number of internal elements. The boundary also delineates relations between X and Y. The cross-boundary relations impact the formation of internal aspects within X and Y. Any change in an element that constitutes X or constitutes Y affects all other elements that define the identity of each group.

Tilly and Tarrow note that such identities and boundary formation are not only present within contentious politics, but also exist in everyday social interactions. Depending on circumstance, some of these identities can be transferred into a movement, and contribute to the formation of a contentious identity. Contentious identities and associated boundaries are rarely created—rather they are pre-existing, activated and

---


81 Ibid.
developed upon. Here, the notion of the *repertoire of contention* seems relevant. If *contentious identities* are pre-existing, they can presumably have been part of a previous *repertoire of contention*, and reactivated through the employment of this *repertoire*.

Tilly and Tarrow argue that existing political institutions, against which social movement actors define themselves, play an important role in shaping *contentious identity* and movement objectives. There is a shared understanding of these boundary formations among movement actors, and their targets or *objects of claim*. The targets, or political actors, seek to manipulate or control this contentious identity by defining permissible answers to questions on the identity of the “us” and the “them”.

Contestation over identity and boundaries is important, as it lays the ground for collective claim making. Identities thus evolve in meaning throughout contentious processes. Political actors make counters assertions of *contentious identity* in order to limit possible claims.

SMT suggests that all movements incorporate some form of *contentious identity* making or activating, even if not consciously. There are many explicit cases of *contentious identity* formation in Arab protest culture. For example, duo Ahmed Fouad Negm and Sheikh Imam’s song “*Humma min wa iḥna min*” is a line by line identification of an “us” against a “them” which draws boundaries and outlines the nature of relations between the two groups:

Who are they and who are we?

---

82 *Ibid.* Pg. 14  
83 *Ibid.* Pg. 8-9  
84 *Ibid.* Pg. 13  
85 *Ibid.* Pg. 15  
86 *Ibid.* Pg. 17  
87 *Ibid.* Pg. 4  
88 Translation: who are they and who are we
They are the princes and the sultans
Who are they and who are we?
They are the money and they rule
We are the poor and the ruled
Take a guess, use your mind
See which one rules the other

Here, Negm clearly defines the “them”, as powerful and wealthy, and relationally identifies the “us”, as poor and disempowered. He then delineates the relationship between the two, with a rhetorical suggestion that the former rules the latter.

I.E Thesis Questions and Methodology

This thesis draws from SMT concepts of contentious identity and the repertoire to answer the following questions, as they relate to the three selected contentious performances: What elements constitute the contentious identities of activists? How do activists define their identity relationally? In essence: who is the “us” and who is the “them”? How does the repertoire contribute to the building of this identity? How does the definition of the “them” relate to the selected parts of the repertoire? How do other aspects of these protest performances contribute to contentious identity formation?

Existing mainstream narratives on the Arab Uprisings reveal to us the importance of ethnographic work: of closely examining the contentious performances, productions used on those performances (i.e. chants, songs, banners, pamphlets, etc.), and engaging with activists in order to develop any understanding of movement claims and objects of claim. The Arab Uprisings cannot be told through a single story—or three for that matter. Each contentious performance focuses on a micro-target, and only together do they reveal the larger narrative. These three cases, however, are selected for their lucid identification of both the macro- and micro-grievances. While the story of each case is just that, the way

89 Ahmed Fouad Negm. “Humma min wa iḥna min”
in which they point to larger grievances and draw from a shared repertoire indicates wider implications.

I attended all three demonstrations examined in this thesis. My history of political research in Egypt exposed me to a regional network of activists and facilitated my ability to join the demonstrations and conduct interviews. The first case, a Tunisian protest hosted by the General Union of Tunisian Students, was held in May of 2013. The information presented in that Chapter is based on my ethnographic observations of the protest, interviews with protest organizers and participants, and protest materials that I collected, photographed or recorded. Interviewees were chosen for their role not simply as demonstrators, but as protest organizers—active participants in the process of selecting and employing protest materials.

The second case, a Nakba commemoration held by an ad hoc group of Egyptian and Palestinian activists in Egypt’s Sharqaya governorate, also took place in May of 2013. The information presented in that Chapter is based on my ethnographic observations of the event, and extensive interviews with dozens of organizing and participating activists and villagers. The third case follows street artist Ammar Abo Bakr through the processes of painting murals in Downtown Cairo. I first met Abo Bakr in March of 2012, while he was painting in Downtown Cairo’s Mohamed Mahmoud Street—an elaborate process that took weeks and involved a “grand opening” during which activists gathered around the murals. In April of 2012, Abo Bakr participated in a panel at the AUC’s Downtown Campus, along with fellow protest artists—I attended. I have since interviewed him several times—in the fall of 2012, over the summer of 2013, in the fall of 2013 and the winter of 2014; I have joined him in the painting process and attended
several of the rallies mobilized around his artwork. That Chapter includes information from those observations and interviews, as well as from recordings of other interviews conducted with the artist, and articles written about his work.

My past participation in activism, journalism and research in the Arab world informed my interactions with these three cases of protest. I was asked to join the Nakba protest with the explicit request that I would publish my observations in order to shed light on the existence of the village and condition of the refugees, with which I complied. The act of amplifying public knowledge is itself a part of the performance, which activists expect will spur awareness and continued action. My analysis of Abo Bakr’s murals—like the other interpretations—is inextricable from the painting itself as conceived of as an “event”. The artist explicitly recognized this, and for this reason, as he explained, he has expended time and effort over the past two years in hopes that I capture the multiple dimensions of his perspective. In essence, these activists are well aware of their protest actions as a process, and the importance of the resulting narrative. Just as I see their actions as illuminating to the movement and contentious processes generally, they see my work as a contribution to an ongoing battle for the story of the Arab Uprisings.
Chapter II: Tunisian Student Protest

II.A Introduction

This Chapter presents the case of a demonstration held by the General Union of Tunisian Students (French: UGET) in May of 2013. The demonstration took place at the Manar University’s College of Law and Political Science. The students used a wide array of protest tools—graffiti, pins, flags, banners, pamphlets, chants, song, and speech. They borrow from and expand upon a repertoire of contention that spans time and space. The event constitutes a part of what the demonstrators view as an ongoing movement that can be traced to the self-immolation of Mohamed Bouazizi, and continues to this day. The toppling of Ben Ali failed to satisfy the demands of these protesters, whose grievances span geographic and temporal scales. This protest event provides insight into the contentious identity of the protesters, and is revealing of the way in which the repertoire of contention from which they draw contributes to the formation of this identity.

II.B Background: Overview of General Union of Tunisian Students

On May 25 of 2013, the leftist UGET hosted the twenty-fifth meeting in its history, and the first meeting after the ouster of Ben Ali. The Tunisian Uprising allowed for the public re-emergence of the group, which had been highly restricted in past decades. While the Union is currently a symbol of opposition to the Habib Bourguiba and Ben Ali governments, and the political stances that they represent, it was not always a contentious organization.

The internal history of the UGET is politically and ideologically tumultuous. Tunisian students based in France founded the Union prior to national independence. French colonial structures left few opportunities for the rise of a locally-based educated
class; the Tunisian intelligentsia was largely based in French universities and was not a radical agent for change.⁹⁰ Wider political developments sparked the foundation of the Union; in 1952, French colonial authorities forced the Tunisian nationalist movement underground. Many of its leaders were arrested, and tight security measures were taken within Tunisia. Members of the nationalist movement, the Neo-Destour Party, established UGET in 1953 as a cover for its independence struggle. UGET served primarily as the Neo-Destour’s negotiating arm for independence; students were subordinate to the party and played a secondary role in the nationalist struggle. Ideologically, the Union, like the Neo-Destour, held a modernist outlook for development and rejected proponents of some tradition-rooted alternative from within Tunisian society.⁹¹

Tunisian independence, granted in 1956, transformed UGET’s socio-political position. The founders and leaders of the Union were integrated into the Neo-Destour Party, and the government. Local universities supplanted their French counterparts as centers for student activism. UGET became a breeding ground for aspiring politicians, and increasingly lost credibility among activist students. In 1966, unprecedented student demonstrations, driven mostly by leftist activists, erupted against UGET. The divisions culminated in the collapse of UGET in 1971, under leftist pressure to make the Union independent and remove the influence of the Neo-Destour.⁹²

The Union, now following a radically different political ideology, resumed activity in 1988.⁹³ UGET departed significantly from its previous position; it denounced

---

⁹¹ Ibid. Pg 24, 25
⁹² Ibid.
Bourguiba’s political approach and repressive rule, as well as that of his successor Ben Ali. While it was internally fragmented and politically restricted, the Union did levy criticism at the government and advocated for student-related issues such as registration fees and academic freedom.94 The Union met sparsely. In 2003, it organized the twenty-fourth meeting of its history, and presented a new treaty that confirmed its secular, leftist approach and emphasized its role beyond the university, in securing citizen rights and freedoms.95

On the eve of the Uprising, UGET boasted over 150,000 members from 162 universities across Tunisia. On January 3, 2011 UGET, in coordination with labor unions, announced a student strike. The size of UGET’s membership makes its contribution to mobilization a significant factor.96 Further, members claim that the groups’ reserve of protest chants and slogans helped feed demonstrators with protest slogans and techniques leading up to the ouster of Ben Ali and beyond. Some even suggest that UGET protesters have been chanting the emblematic slogan of the Uprisings—the people want to topple the system— for years.97

The May 2013 UGET rally emerged in the context of an internal split between two factions within the organization: the first of these groups consisted of the Union Radicals, the Pan-Arabists, and some Baathist and the Democratic Patriots. The second faction consisted of the Tunisian Workers Party and the United Democratic Patriots Party, with support from the Call for Tunisia Party. The Call for Tunisia Party was

established after the ouster of Ben Ali and consists in part of members from Bourguiba’s Neo-Destour and Ben Ali’s Constitutional Democratic Rally Parties. The first, and more revolutionary, faction emerged as more dominant, and shaped the 2013 meeting.

The meeting also took place in the context of the February 2013 assassination of human rights lawyer Choukri Belaid. Belaid was a member of the Democratic Patriots Movement, which operates under the umbrella of the Popular Front. He was an outspoken critic of Bourguiba, Ben Ali and the post-Upisng Islamist-led government. Belaid defended political prisoners under Bourguiba and Ben Ali, and himself was imprisoned under both leaders for his activism. He rose in prominence in the context of the Tunisian Uprisings; he was an avid pan-Arabist, actively opposed normalization with Israel, and was a part of Iraqi President Saddam Hussein’s defense team. 98 In the aftermath of Ben Ali’s ouster, Belaid continued to lead demonstrations against the Ennahda Party. 99 The student faction that led the 2013 UGET meeting is supported by Belaid’s Democratic Patriots Movement, and explicitly describes the UGET as an inseparable part of the Popular Front. The slain Belaid emerged as a central figure in the UGET demonstration. 100

II.C Case: General Union of Tunisian Students 2013 Demonstration

On the days leading up to May 25 2013, colorful, printed fliers marked walls throughout Tunis. The posters were plastered on the exterior of the French-style buildings of the epicenter of the Tunisian Uprising, Habib Bourguiba Avenue, whose wide streets

98 Belaid’s defense of Saddam Hussein is portrayed as a means of rejecting humiliation of an Arab leader at the hands of foreign powers.
were interrupted with rolls of barbed wire. The fliers dotted college campuses, and were a topic of conversations among activists throughout the city. These posters were simple: an image of protesting Tunisians from the Uprisings, and the UGET emblem. The sparse text included a title: The Building Conference, a subheading: Non-aligned Students for Democracy and Against Tyranny, and logistical information: College of Law and Political Science in Tunis, May 25.

On the morning hours of May 25, before the demonstration began, a few dozen UGET members gathered in the College campus’ courtyard to prepare for the meeting. The courtyard, clad with political graffiti, set the scene for the demonstration. The open courtyard—typically a center of student traffic—was relatively empty that Saturday, save the UGET members and few other students checking to see if their final grades were posted. One group of female students who had just received exam results frolicked in the yard singing—"wa hayāt alby wa aḫraḫu)—lines from iconic Egyptian singer Abdel Halim Hafez’s tune, an end of the school year classic in many parts of the Arab world.

Three sides of the square courtyard are surrounded by buildings: an auditorium on one side, an open cafeteria on another with an outdoor set of stairs leading to a balcony with lecture rooms, and a third building with classrooms. The light-colored, concrete buildings are adorned with blue, wrought-iron window dressings—an architectural feature of many buildings in Tunis. In the center of the courtyard are two square patches of grass, with trees and bushes—one of the squares featured an arabesque fountain in the center. The grassy squares are bordered by white and blue, backless, concrete benches.
Students noted that the graffiti was sprayed weeks before; most of it was not elaborate, scribbled by amateurs. The slogans and images were almost all written exclusively in black, red and green—colors associated with pan-Arabism and present in flags of many Arab countries. The graffiti was an overwhelming presence; it covered the buildings, stairs, the balcony overlooking the courtyard and benches within the vicinity of the green patches. A phrase scribbled across a wall in the three colors identified the graffitists as “The Arab Student Guard”, a Baath-affiliated student group. While most of the graffiti was hand-sprayed, one stenciled phrase, repeated throughout the courtyard, read: “unity – struggle – independence.”

The images and slogans in the courtyard represented prominent Arab protest symbols. Palestinian imagery was especially prevalent. Cartoon figures of Handala—Naji al-‘Ali’s iconic depiction of a destitute Palestinian child drawn always with his back turned to the audience as he witnesses a scene of oppression. The Palestinian flag was painted several times. Lines from famous Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish, declaring the ephemeral nature of Palestine, were written on the balcony overlooking the courtyard. Calls for ‘resistance’ and the ‘liberation of Palestine’ marked the railings leading up to the balcony. One line of graffiti read: “Palestine is the Heart of Tunisia.” The graffiti also expressed solidarity with ongoing resistance in Syria and Egypt. The recently killed Egyptian activist Gaber Salah, known popularly as Jika, was depicted in a relatively elaborate painting in the courtyard.
Other graffiti evoked the name of Choukri Belaid. One line promised “revenge” for his assassination, another accused the Tunisian government of killing Belaid: “Surely Ghannouchi Killed Belaid.”

A few dozen students sat in the grassy patches in the courtyard, under the shade of the bushes, and prepared shirts, flags, pins and bracelets for the demonstration. While preparing, the students discussed the agenda for the demonstration and at points erupted in chants or song. The chants were primarily decades-old rallying cries, calling “workers, peasants and students” to action. The shirts, pins and flags featured a number of symbols. Many of the shirts and flags carried the logo of the UGET. Handala and the Palestinian flag were also prominently featured in the items.

---

101 Photograph by the author
Figure 2: UGET Flag and Palestinian Flag Bracelets

The image of Aly Al-Barhoumy, a Tunisian farmer, was also featured on the pins. Al-Barhoumy became an iconic figure after his brief appearance on a television interview in the years following the Uprisings, by responding on his burdensome condition with the line: ḥalitna ʾṣmūṭa ʾaṣlān.103

Figure 3: Our situation is very difficult

102 Photograph by the author
103 Translation: Our situation is very difficult
A group of students also prepared the auditorium, off of the courtyard, for the demonstration. The auditorium is a large, high-ceilinged room with the capacity for a few hundred individuals; the space is lined with rows of blue aluminum chairs and long lecture tables, which the students used to stand atop of. There is a stage at the front of the auditorium, with a microphone stand in the center. The students hung large, printed banners around the room. All banners included the logo of UGET and a slogan, indicating the groups’ positions on major issues. At the front of the room, students hung a banner that featured the image of the slain Choukri Belaid, along with the slogan “raise your heads.” Belaid often repeated the slogan in life; it became associated with his iconography in death. The banner heading introduced the conference—for “building” Tunisia. Large Tunisian and Palestinian flags draped on either side of Belaid’s image. Other banners hung around the auditorium and featured slogans including:

- The Union is in the Service of the Students
- And the University in the Service of the Nation

- The General Union for Tunisian Students:
  In an Eternal Struggle Against Imperialism, Zionism and Backwardness

- The General Union for Tunisian Students:
  Is for the Criminalization of all Forms of Normalization
  With the Zionist Entity

- The General Union for Tunisian Students:
  Supports Every Struggle for National Liberation
  And Chief Among them the Palestinian Cause

- The General Union for Tunisian Students:
  Eternal Loyalty for Tunisia’s Martyrs
The first three listed slogans in particular were featured above the stage, and were repeated several times in banners around the auditorium.

As the students prepared the space, hundreds of Tunisians—predominantly young students like themselves—began streaming into the College’s courtyard, waving flags featuring the UGET emblem. The demonstrators gathered in the courtyard, where they distributed the prepared pins, shirts and flags to one another. Some students came donned in the Palestinian kuffiya, clad with an image of the Dome of the Rock. Other students had hand-drawn figures of Handala on their bookbags, or decorated their bags with key chains of the cartoon or of the Palestinian flag. The students also distributed pamphlets, for a campaign called ma galoulnech (they did not tell us). The pamphlet references promised investments meant to create economic opportunities, and claims that masked in this narrative is the fact that thirty per cent of these positions are reserved for foreigners. The main line of the pamphlet, written in a larger print and encircled in a box, is: “The International Monetary Fund (IMF) marginalizes Tunisian talents.”

104 Photograph by the author
After exchanging shirts, flags, pamphlets and pins in the courtyard, the demonstrators began flowing into the auditorium. The hundreds of attendees filled the space; their chants and songs echoed in the high-ceilinged room. The name of Belaid was repeated countless times, along with chants calling for the toppling of *ḥizb il-ikhwān*, a reference to the ruling Islamist party. Another recurring chant blasted the ruling Ennahda Party as “agents of imperialism”, “backwards” and “brokers”: *wukalāʾ al istiʿmār, nahdawi, rajī, simṣār*. One song, repeated numerous times within the half-hour time period, was “*Shayyid Uṣurak*” (Build your Palaces)—a well-known rallying cry for resistance, by Egyptian poet Ahmed Fouad Negm and lyricist and singer Sheikh Imam. Hundreds sang in unison, line by line, raising their voices in euphoria as the song

---

105 Poster from UGET Conference. Tunis, Tunisia. May 25, 2013

106 Translation: agents of imperialism, Ennahda (party members), backwards, broker
identified ‘ommał w fallahyn w, talaba\textsuperscript{107} as leaders of a “path with no return.”\textsuperscript{108}

Basma Khalfaoui took center stage as the crowd cheered her slain ex-husband’s name, “Belaid, Belaid.” Standing below the image of Belaid and the Palestinian and Tunisian flags, she raised her hand to silence the crowd. “Raise your heads,” she repeated, as the audience erupted in roars—“raise your heads high. Raise your heads strugglers, for you are proceeding on the path of Choukri Belaid. Our path is one, and we will prevail.”\textsuperscript{109}

II.D Analysis

To those taking part in the UGET demonstration, the Tunisian Uprising was not over; the ouster of Ben Ali failed to satisfy their demands. The assassinated Choukri Belaid, slain months before the meeting, was a central rallying figure. The demonstrators demanded justice for Belaid, but more importantly he emerged as a symbol. Belaid provided a way for demonstrators to articulate their controversial identity and to mobilize action. The slain political activist symbolized not simply a case of injustice, but was emblematic of his lifelong causes: opposition to the tyranny of Bourguiba and Ben Ali, pan-Arabism and anti-Zionism.

The phrase that came to be associated with Belaid—“raise your heads”—is one that he himself pulled from an Arab protest repertoire. The line is historically tied to Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser. The full slogan—“raise your head brother, for the age of subjugation is over”—is associated with Abdel Nasser’s anti-imperialist position. Adel Nasser defiantly used the slogan in 1950s speeches, as some imperialist forces fell and others faced heated opposition from Arab populations. The phrase was

\textsuperscript{107} Translation: workers, peasants and students
\textsuperscript{108} See Appendix for full song
among many that the Egyptian president used to rally public morale for liberation struggles, which he often backed with armed force. The rhetoric was a component of Abdel Nasser’s vision for Arab liberation and progress, which included a complementary set of political, economic and socio-cultural ideas.

This idealistic vision consisted of: 1) a political unity among the Arab people, 2) economic independence from foreign powers and populist notions of economic justice, and 3) a socio-cultural assertion of local Arab-Islamic tradition. Support for all Arab liberation struggles was an important aspect of this vision, with Palestine taking center stage. Belaid consistently supported this broad vision in its entirety; his use of the Nasserist phrase was neither accidental nor haphazard. The UGET demonstrators and Basma Khalfaoui emphasized and repeated this particular phrase for the same reasons as Belaid. It allowed them to fulfill two goals: 1) the line symbolizes an entire political, economic and socio-cultural ideology that articulates the demonstrators’ contentious identity and 2) its familiarity resonates, and enhances mobilization. The graffiti, banners, chants, and songs of the group—which pull from an Arab repertoire—all consistently confirm an adherence to the outlined political, economic and socio-cultural stances.

The graffiti is an explicit assertion of a pan-Arab identity. It is a political assertion that Tunisia is an inextricable part of the Arab nation. The colors (pan-Arab black, green and red), slogans (in support of Palestine and Syria) and images (of Handala, the Palestinian flag, and Jika) all bolstered the causes of fellow Arabs. One line in particular, “Palestine is the Heart of Tunisia” asserted the inseparability of Tunisia from an Arab nation. Commenting on the graffiti, a UGET member, Bilal Riahy, noted:

The Tunisian people remain steadfast to their Arab-Islamic identity…Handala, and the Palestinian flag, and Jika are our symbols – any event affecting an Arab
citizen, anywhere in this Arab nation, affects us all. We are one Arab people, and stand in solidarity with one another.110 Riahy’s assertion of pan-Arabism is in and of itself a contentious notion—one that Edward Said argues was battled not only by the divisive policies of the British and French, but also by contemporary American and Israeli policies.111

In Tunisia, the westward-looking governments of Bourguiba and Ben Ali suppressed this pan-Arab stance. The effects of the suppression of an Arab identity are tangible in today’s Tunisia, where French socio-cultural hegemony is ubiquitous in urban centers. The usage of the French language over Arabic is a very basic indicator. UGET protesters’ consistent use of Arabic and assertion of their Arab identity is markedly noticeable in a city where the French language is commonplace, and is a conscious expression of an Arab identity and rejection of foreign influence.

In addition to socio-cultural aspects, UGET demonstrators highlighted economic grievances that touched on: 1) rejection of foreign intervention and 2) populist notions of economic justice. A pamphlet distributed by students for the campaign called ma galoulnech (they did not tell us) attributes economic grievances to the role of Western powers in Tunisia, in this case the IMF. Pins and pamphlets featuring the image of Tunisian farmer Aly Al-Barhoumy were a reference to socio-economic disparities; the farmer and his phrase were popularized as indicative of the continued failure of the government to address the socio-economic grievances of the revolution.112 The symbol points to the failure of the Tunisian government to diverge from neo-liberal policies that mark the country’s macro-economic approach, and perpetuate socio-economic disparities.

A song performed repeatedly by demonstrators, “Shayyid Usurak” (Build Your Palaces), also points to issues of economic exploitation and socio-economic disparity. The song is among the many popular tunes written by Egyptian poet Ahmed Fouad Negm—renowned in Arab culture as the poet of the people, and revolution. Negm’s duo with composer and singer Sheikh Imam began in the 1960s; the pair collaborated for three decades, until Sheikh Imam’s death. At points, the two were imprisoned for their politically contentious music. Negm’s poetry carried particular resonance among popular classes in the era of Sadat’s economic Infitah, when socio-economic disparity became increasingly acute. The poet’s work juxtaposes the ostentatious spending of a governing class, secured through exploitative practices, with overwhelming poverty. Negm also points to the brutal suppression of opposing voices. Until his last days in 2013, Negm pointed most explicitly at the policies of the Sadat era as a primary source of egregious socio-economic conditions.113

While the government of Abdel Nasser imprisoned Negm in 1967, the poet still celebrates the era of Abdel Nasser for its ideological orientation. In a 2011 interview, Negm made this position clear:

Who invented the word qawmiyya ‘arabiyya? Abdel Nasser. I came to slander Abdel Nasser, and said no. He cannot be compared with the others [Sadat and Mubarak]…with all of the terrible things he did.115

Negm repeats this position throughout interviews: “When Abdel Nasser died I was in prison, and I cried, not for Abdel Nasser, but for the dream…the pole holding up the tent

114 Translation: pan-Arabism
had fallen.” Negm proceeded to harshly criticize Sadat and Mubarak’s American-oriented position, divergence from pan-Arab stances (specifically by signing the Camp David Accords), and economic liberalization policies that he associates with widening socio-economic disparities and vulnerability to Western political influence.

Throughout the poet’s work and many public interviews, he elucidates his populist positioning, as a supporter of: pan-Arabism, economic independence, economic justice, and local, folk culture. Negm’s manner of dress (he often if not always donned the *galabiyya*), musical style (folk) and instrumentals (often solely a *ʿud*) are consistent with his positioning. Again, the Tunisian students’ selection of a song by Negm is not haphazard—it is consistent with the *contentious identity* that they assert through the rest of their performance materials.

The song selected by the Tunisian activists, “*Shayyid Usurak*” is addressed to a governing elite on behalf of what the poem identifies as “us”, a popular class: a set of workers, peasants and farmers. It establishes a boundary between the two groups: the former is ostentatious, the latter hardworking popular classes, workers, peasants and students. The *relational* aspect of this boundary is clear: “they” exploit and brutalize “us”. The poem provokes this governing class to continue with its actions, concluding that popular awareness of the source of socio-economic grievances will ultimately lead to resistance. The poem begins with: “build your palaces atop of the fields, at the expense of our fatigue and work.” The lines are a pointed accusation at the ruling class for

---

118 A traditional form of Arab/Egyptian peasant dress
119 A traditional Arab string instrument
flamboyant spending at the cost of the degradation of livelihoods, symbolized by the agricultural fields, and of society. The poem continues to point to the brutal suppression of society: “release your dogs upon us, in the streets, and shut your prison cells on us.” Negm ends the poem with lines pushing for resistance “we have come to know the source of our pains, and we have come to know ourselves, workers, peasants, and students, the time has come and we have started, to clear a path with no return, the victory is in sight.”\textsuperscript{120}

The selection of this song from an Arab protest repertoire resonates in Tunisia, like Egypt, because the same patterns of relations exist. Just as in Egypt, liberalization came along with socio-economic disparities in Tunisia. The students’ chants—in the name of peasants, workers and students—reaffirmed their positioning among popular classes. These chants come from a repertoire that is older than neo-liberal policies; they emerged in 1950s Egypt, in the rhetoric of Abdel Nasser and mainstream cultural productions bolstered by his government, as a response to economic policies that had a similar effect of generating or perpetuating socio-economic stratification under British imperial rule. On the chants’ identification of particular classes, Riahy suggests:

The Uprising is not classist, it belongs to everyone, wide ranges of the population from Tunisia and elsewhere in the Arab nation protested. But perhaps it is the slogans of the Arab left that have been most prominent in the streets because they are most capable of presenting the grievances of the people, particularly the economic dimensions.\textsuperscript{121}

Riahy’s observation is of further interest for his reference to “the slogans of the Arab left”; here the demonstrator recognizes the value of the repertoire in articulating grievances and mobilizing the streets.

\textsuperscript{120} Ahmed Fouad Negm and Sheikh Imam. “Shayyid Usurak.”
These slogans that Riahy mentions—those of the “Arab left”—are historically intertwined with anti-imperialist rhetoric. The fact that they continue to resonate is rooted in the demonstrators’ perception that the same relations of power persist. In their banners and chants, the demonstrators explicitly use words for “imperialism”: *imbiriyyaliyya* and *istiʿmaṯr*. The protesters clearly identify the ruling Ennahada Party as “agents of imperialism”, alluding specifically to their role as economic interlocutors to foreign actors by referring to them as “brokers”.

In a comment on these anti-imperialist slogans and identification of socio-economic grievances, Riahy summarizes what he views as the purpose of the Uprising:

> The current government is only an extension of official conspiracy with Western forces, which control Tunisia today, and at whose hands the population is humiliated. This is an extension of the policies of Ben Ali, and they were the policies of Bourguiba before him. We want to challenge these ways of governing. That is what “the people want” means, although the slogan has become empty from overuse, its incorrect interpretation, and the lack of an alternative.122

Here, Riahy points forcefully and explicitly to a sense of continuity, in which relations of political, economic and socio-cultural power extending from the colonial era—albeit recast in form and at the hands of different actors—remain. This sense of continuity permeates the cultural productions of the UGET protest, with their deliberate use of the term “imperialism” to describe Western-Tunisian relations, and “brokers” to identify the position of local political elite within that relationship.

II.E Conclusion

The UGET demonstration depicts a *contentious identity* that comprises the following elements: 1) a notion of shared Arab identity and struggle 2) economic independence from outside intervention (particularly IFIs) 3) socio-economic justice and

---

4) the valuation of Arab-Islamic culture. This identity is *relational*, depicted against the identity of a “them”. The “them” is ideological, and explicitly includes notions of: 1) “imperialism” involving Western economic intervention 2) “Zionism” as an extension of “imperial” relations and 3) local “agents” of this intervention (i.e. political elite).

Implicitly, the identity is set up against a “them” that also divides among Arab populations, generates socio-economic disparities, and devalues Arab culture. The relationship between the two sides of the boundary is explicit: “they” exploit, marginalize and brutalize “us” for their own interests. The UGET demonstrators are able to lay out this contentious identity with just a few chants, banners, slogans, songs and pamphlets by drawing heavily from a *repertoire of contention*.

The *repertoire* from which the Tunisian students draw spans Arab space and time. The symbols that they employ, such as Choukri Belaid, themselves are associated with older *repertoires*. The durability of a *repertoire* over decades and in different parts of the Arab world points to a perception that a broad set of power relations—between Western actors and the Arab people, between ruling Arab elites and society as a whole—remain. Similarly, the counter-formation—the *relational* way in which contentious actors define themselves against ruling powers—also persists. The elements that constitute the *contentious identity* of the UGET protesters are the same elements that define Arab anti-imperial movements from throughout the twentieth century. Protest materials are infused with meanings that carry historical significance, and are used to express an entire narrative via a single symbol, image, phrase or song.
Chapter III: *Nakba* Commemoration

**III.A Introduction**

This Chapter presents the case of a May 2013 demonstration held in commemoration of the 1948 *Nakba* that took place in the Egyptian Nile Delta. As part of the demonstration, dozens of Egyptian and Palestinian activists travelled from Cairo to a Sharqiyah governorate village, Geziret Fadel. The village was established and is wholly populated by 1948 Palestinian refugees from *Biʾr al-Sabiʿ* and their descendants. In recent years, Egypt’s activists had marked the occasion in Cairo’s Tahrir Square. This *Nakba* commemoration, in a rural and marginalized center, stood apart from typical urban-centered demonstrations.

If we are to consider a contentious demonstration as a performance, then this was particularly interactive. The protesters involved refugees in the commemoration: medical consultations, games with the children and discussions with the village residents were all planned parts of the day’s agenda. Refugee children had themselves prepared for the demonstration, and joined in the performance. An authority figure, the so-called village *Omdeh*¹²³, interjected in the performance in his own way, by attempting to set the tone for the commemoration and limit direct interaction between activists and villagers. The activists rejected his authority. It is these unscripted interactions that are most revealing of the *contentious identity* that protesters assert through their actions.

**III.B Background: Palestinian Activism in Egypt**

Activism surrounding the Palestinian cause has been a prominent theme of cultural productions and contentious actions for decades, throughout the Arab world. In Egypt, expressions of solidarity with Palestine were mainstream in the 1950s and 1960s and

¹²³ Translation: The title for a village governor, an official position in pre-1952 Egypt.
were bolstered by the ideologically pan-Arabist Nasser government, which painted Palestine as an Egyptian issue. The theme of Palestine resistance, as a symbol of shared Arab struggle, was prominent in the Nasser-era mainstream cultural productions including poetry, song and film. This culture also emerged on a grassroots level, such as in the folkloric traditions of the Suez Canal zone, whose population found itself on the frontlines of military confrontation during the Israeli occupation of Sinai.124

Under Presidents Sadat and Mubarak, a foreign policy realignment involving closer ties to the US and a peace treaty with Israel altered the political position of the Palestinian cause in Egypt. It rendered mobilization in support for Palestine contentious and in opposition to the State. At the same time, the taboo of directly opposing the Palestinian cause left some space for pro-Palestine mobilization. However, the notion that these instances of mobilization implied a rejection of the Egyptian government’s stance on Palestine was not lost to Egyptian authorities—officials targeted and in some cases arrested involved activists.125

In order to erode popular commitment for the Palestinian cause, the Sadat government matched its foreign policy shift with a socio-cultural abandonment of pan-Arabist sentiment in favor of an “Egypt-first” logic. The foreign policy realignment is also interconnected with a change in economic policy, which altered socio-economic dynamics and empowered a politically-affiliated business class with a financial interest in Western-oriented policies. This class advocated for internal security and maintenance of stable relations with foreign powers at the expense of Arab solidarity. Government and

124 “Simsimiyya” tunes are a signature of Suez resistance culture, were at the forefront of popular attention in the 1960s and 70s, and reemerged with the 2011 Uprising, including in the form of Downtown Cairo cultural centers such as El-Mastaba: <http://www.el-mastaba.org/el-tanbura.html>

media rhetoric discredited Nasser’s policies as futile adventures, scapegoated the Palestinians as responsible for Egypt’s political and economic woes, and blamed the Palestinian predicament on the Palestinian people’s abandonment of their own land.  

Palestinians residing in Egypt were deprived of previous rights to access State services.  

The Mubarak government furthered these policies and rhetoric. In light of the 1993/1995 Oslo Accords, Egypt established itself as a regional mediator, a channel for US and Israeli negotiations with the Palestinian Authority. Under US pressure, the Mubarak government also opened trade with Israel, as part of the 2004 Qualified Industrial Zones agreement: a form of economic normalization. With the 2006 election of Hamas in the Palestinian territories and subsequent Hamas take-over of the Gaza Strip and an US/Israeli-led international blockade on the territory, Egypt became an important actor in maintaining the siege on the territory. Egypt also came to play the role of mediator in Fatah-Hamas negotiations, on which it made no notable progress.

Public displays of opposition to Egypt’s policies on Palestine were expressed in the 1970s and throughout subsequent decades. Protesters drew from repertoires of contention, namely those of the Nasser-era, which emphasized a shared Arab identity and common struggle against Israel. Peace agreements (1993/1995 Oslo Accords) or eruptions of violence (1982 invasion of Lebanon, 1985 bombing of PLO headquarters in Tunis, 1987 and 2000 Intifadas, 2008/2009 invasion of Gaza) often sparked mobilization, which was

---

130 Ibid.
131 Ibid.
mainly organized by ad hoc groups. Independent activists from the Committee for the Defense of National Culture, a leftist, pan-Arabist coalition formed in the 1970s against a cultural shift that threatened to reshape popular consciousness, played an important roll in coordinating protests, as did students. These activists, among others, formed broad-based committees to organize demonstrations; the groupings dissolved and reformed in response to major events.132

Activists, many of the same ones involved in Palestine demonstrations, reacted to the 2003 US invasion of Iraq in a similar manner: with public displays of rejection of a foreign invasion of Arab land and the associated silence of Arab governments.133 In the years preceding the Uprisings, demonstrations for Palestine and Iraq, and convoys to the Gaza Strip protesting the blockade, were frequent occurrences. These took place alongside, and often involving the same activists as, protests for a range of causes including kifaya (Enough) with its political demands, the 6 of April Movement with its labor-related demands, and Kullina Khālid Saʿid (We are all Khaled Said) with its focus on police brutality.

In the aftermath of the first 18 days of the Egyptian Uprising, activists continued to mobilize for Palestine. The atmosphere of frequent street demonstrations that began in 2011 and continued through 2013 allowed for widespread mobilization for a range of causes. On several occasions—including the planned Palestinian Day of Rage on March 15 of 2011, Land Day on March 30, and the Nakba anniversary on May 15—Tahrir Square was flooded with rallies in solidarity with Palestine. The Palestinian flag, kuffiyya, and the pan-Arab and Palestine-themed artistic cannon of the Nasser-era constituted the

---

132 Ibid.
133 Ibid.
protests’ repertoire of contention. 134 On one notable occasion, a convey departing from Tahrir Square in May 14 of 2011 sought to travel to Gaza, but was stopped by military tanks that blocked the Salam Bridge, the entry point to Sinai. On other occasions, protests were directed towards the Israeli Embassy in Giza. 135 In August of 2011, Israeli forces killed five Egyptian guards on the Sinai border; the mobilization that ensued targeted the Israeli embassy and lasted for weeks. 136

In terms of Egyptian government policies, the post-Mubarak era has generally witnessed continuity on the Palestine issue. The early SCAF-period did mark some departure from previous policies. Among the three initial charges put forth against Mubarak, one was on corruption related to the export of natural gas to Israel. At the time, the charge itself was indicative of recognition of discontent with Palestine-related policies. 137 Under Foreign Minister Nabil al-‘Arabi, other symbolic departures were initiated. In April of 2011, al-Arabi announced the opening of Gaza’s Rafah Crossing and denounced the blockade. In May, al-Arabi brokered relatively successful Fatah-Hamas reconciliation agreement, after many Mubarak-era failed attempts. This policy shift ended when al-‘Arabi assumed the “less-sensitive” position of Secretary-General of the Arab League in June of 2011. 138 Palestine was again a cause to be suppressed;

scapegoating of Palestinians surged particularly in recent months, under the interim-presidency of ‘Adly Mansour.139

III.C Case: 2013 Nakba Commemoration

As the sun rose on Friday May 17 of 2013, dozens of activists—clad in Palestinian kuffiyyas and draped with Egyptian and Palestinian flags—converged onto the quiet streets of Cairo’s Mesaha Square in Doqqi. Some of the Egyptian and Palestinian activists sat at an outdoor café—with aluminum tables and wooden chairs that are emblematic of Cairene street shops—and drank tea. Others began loading the charter bus, with large, rolled, laminated banners, toys, snacks and candy for children, and medical supplies.

One Palestinian activist, a medical student in Cairo, pulled out her sketchbook from her black messenger bag as she sipped her mint tea, and opened it to a cartoon she had drawn—of a bearded Islamist figure in Pharaonic headdress, dotted with stars of David and American flag stripes. “I am glad that I am from Jerusalem,” the student remarked as she showed others her latest sketch, “at least there people know that they live under imperialism.140 Here, they don’t realize it.” “It looks like you’ll be the next Naji al-Ali,” one of the Egyptian activists told her as he peered over her sketch.

140 Original wording: “taḥt il ist ‘maḥ”
The story of this *Nakba* commemoration begins weeks before it took place. A Palestinian activist came across mention of a substantial community of 1948 refugees from *Biʾr al-Sabiʿ* who fled to Egypt, and informed her connections in Cairo—a group of four Egyptian and Palestinian activists including the founder of the “We are All Khaled Said” Facebook page, Abdel Rahman Mansour. The four, all closely involved in Palestinian activism, found the reference peculiar; the information was contrary to common perceptions that no substantial refugee community existed in the country due to a 1948 policy that closed Egypt’s western borders to Palestinians. Further, these activists had all established connections with Palestinian families in Egypt—and had believed themselves to be well-informed about the limited community that existed.

The four activists took the reference to the Palestinian embassy in Cairo, where they inquired about the refugees. There, staff members insisted that no refugee communities

---

141 Image provided by artist.
existed in Egypt. The activists then reached out to their vast network of activists from throughout the country—and were pointed to Geziret Fadel, a village in the Nile Delta governorate of Sharqiyyah. Upon locating the village in April of 2013, the activists visited several times, gathering information on its history and current conditions. The group learned that the village was indeed established by the Bi’r al-Sabi’ 1948 refugees, and consists entirely of these refugees and their descendants—an estimated three thousand individuals. The village is named Gezira or island because of its physical isolation at the time of foundation, and Fadel after the name of one of the founders of the village. For the past sixty-five years, this village has been almost completely off the radar of major media sources, non-governmental organizations and activist networks. The Egyptian government does not officially recognize Geziret Fadel or its residents, and thus the informal village is left with no infrastructure or public services, and the people with no basic rights. The villagers do not have official refugee status.

To no avail, the activists lobbied Arab and Egyptian media to shed light on the neglected community in hopes of building pressure for the extension of rights for the refugees. The Nakba anniversary presented an opportune chance to garner attention for the village and its refugees. In recent years, the activists had commemorated in Downtown Cairo—where their presence was intended to demonstrate popular commitment to the Palestinian cause. However, the existence of a refugee community provided a fitting rallying point for the occasion. As one of the activists put it: “These people, the refugees, are the biggest victims of the Nakba. They are the ones we should commemorate with.”

Over eighty activists joined the trip to Geziret Fadel. The group was mixed; it
included Egyptian activists, among them prominent figures from the Uprising, and
Palestinians from Gaza, the West Bank, and dually-displaced refugees from Syria. On the
bus, the group unpacked their flags in preparation for the planned march through the
village. The bus drove out of Cairo, past the vast fields of the Delta, and into Sharqiyyah,
through the governorate’s busy capital Zagazig. As the bus moved beyond the city, the
paved roads ended and gave way to a dirt road that eventually became too narrow for the
bus to navigate. Activists dislodged the bus; they spread their banners, and lifted their
flags, preparing to march into the village. The banners read:

In memory of the Nakba, Geziret Fadel will no longer be forgotten
Egypt and Palestine One people.. One struggle..
From Egypt to Palestine, the revolution continues and will prevail
We will return one day, to Bi’r al-Sabi‘

The group walked towards the village, carrying their banners, flags, gifts and medical
supplies, and singing protest tunes—including the Palestinian anthem and Ahmed Fouad
Negm’s rallying song, “Shayyid Usurak”\textsuperscript{143}. The dirt path was filled with rubbish
and lined with mud brick walls. As the group approached the village, Palestinian flags waving
from hay thatched rooftops became visible. Children, some wearing \textit{kuffiyas} in

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{nakba_commemoration_banner.jpg}
\caption{Nakba Commemoration Banner\textsuperscript{142}}
\end{figure}

\textsuperscript{142} Photograph by author.
\textsuperscript{143} “Build Your Palaces” – See Appendix for full song
preparation for the visitors, came running towards the demonstrators to greet them. They joined the procession, as the group made its way to the ‘village center’: the one concrete structure among mud-brick buildings. There, the Omdeh stood on the veranda of the center and greeted the activists.

The Omdeh—as he introduced himself, and was referred to by the refugees—was one of the few educated members of the village. He lived and worked in Cairo, and would return to the village on some weekends and occasions. The refugees, young and old, had gathered on the veranda, and were seated around the Omdeh, and on the ground level below him. The older villagers dressed in an expressly Palestinian style: red embroidery adorned the women’s thobs, while headdresses draped from men’s heads. The Omdeh was a notable exception—he was the only villager wearing a suit. While younger refugees did not don traditional clothing, their tattered dress too stood in contrast to that of the Omdeh.

The Omdeh asked some villagers to bring him a microphone and speakers, so that he could make a speech. He proceeded to warmly welcome the activists. The Omdeh referred to the Nakba as a celebration, a marker of the day that Palestinians will return to their homes, with all the embellishments of Arab oratory. The Omdeh then offered an overview of the village for the visitors: he described the village in shining terms, claiming that refugees earn decent incomes, and expressed thanks to the Palestinian authorities and to the Egyptians, who have welcomed the Palestinians as “guests.”

As the Omdeh was speaking, an organizing activist spotted a staff member from the Cairo Palestinian embassy in the crowd—the activists had brawled with that same employee at the embassy days before, over his persistent denial that a refugee community
existed in Egypt. As the Omdeh finished his performance, he pulled one of the Palestinian organizers aside. He warned the activist not to allow demonstrators to roam around the village, and asked him not to return to the village again, threatening to inform Egyptian intelligence services if he did. The activist ignored the warnings, ascended the veranda, took the Omdeh’s microphone, and proceeded to introduce himself and his fellow demonstrators to the villagers.

The Palestinian activist laid out the agenda for the day: the medical students on the trip would take their supplies and make house visits, offering their services to anyone who needs it. Another group of activists would take the toys inside of the village center, where they would play with the children. The speaker would remain on the veranda, and ask the older villagers about their living conditions, because “with all respect to the Omdeh, conditions here do not appear to be as he describes them.”

On the veranda, the activist pressed villagers to be frank about their living conditions. The refugees resoundingly replied with expressions of gratefulness to Egypt for hosting them for so long. The activists prodded further, asking refugees about access to public service, their legal rights and their incomes. The older refugees explained that while in the Nasser era they were granted access to the public institutions of neighboring villages—including education and health services—many of these rights were terminated under the Sadat and Mubarak presidencies. The refugees are required to pay the same fee as foreigners to access most basic services; they have no right to property ownership or formal employment. The majority of the villagers works as day laborers on large tracts of land owned by Egyptian companies or families, as mechanics or in small shops in neighboring villages, or collect and sort garbage for meager wages.
Inside of the community center—a wide, concrete room—children played beneath banners thanking Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas and the Palestinian ambassador to Egypt for supporting the village. One banner is addressed from the “Palestinian community in Sharqiyah, since the year 1948” to “the noble President Mahmoud Abbas, Abu Mazen” for his “eternal support for us.” When asked, villagers noted, with no hint of irony, that the banners were from the Palestinian embassy and were hung when the village center was built, years ago.

Figure 8: The Palestinian Community in Sharqiyah Thanks Mahmoud Abbas

When asked about their daily lives, the children had little to tell. They did not attend school; some walked to a neighboring village to attend a kuttab or reading class that does not charge students. The walk takes two hours, by the estimate of the children. When asked about future personal or career aspirations, the children had little to offer in response. Instead, they repeated the phrases of older refugees: expressions of thanks to Egypt for hosting them as guests, and dreams of returning to a lost homeland. While most villagers have never laid eyes on Bi‘r al-Sabi‘, even the youngest children describe it vividly, adding illustrative accounts of the night their grandparents were bombarded by Israeli fire in 1948, listing dead relatives by full name, and recounting the journey to

144 Photograph by author.
Egypt. Eight year old Samih offered to show me his grandfather’s olive tree seeds, which he definitively told me that he will one day plant outside of his family home in Bi’r al-Sabi’. “We are Palestinian guests in Egypt, and will one day return to Bi’r al-Sabi’,” was an unprompted phrase echoed by villagers of all ages.

III.D Analysis

The May 2013 Nakba commemoration in Geziret Fadel stands apart from past ways of marking the event in Egypt. Rather than converging upon Downtown Cairo—a center of power and traffic that makes the location ideal for mobilization against authority—the activists chose a marginalized setting. The existence of a neglected refugee community in Egypt provided an opportune rallying point. Geziret Fadel symbolizes two dimensions of the grievances protesters aim to elucidate through Palestine activism: 1) the role of foreign actors in Palestinian dispossession, and 2) the role of Arab elite in maintaining this dispossession. The Bi’r al-Sabi’ villagers were displaced by foreign force, yet remain destitute due to Arab (here Egyptian and Palestinian) political elite.

In the early semi-scripted parts of the demonstration, during the march into the village, activists drew explicitly from a protest repertoire with the use of props such as flags, resistance songs, and especially the slogans on the prepared banner. The banner was an overt assertion of a pan-Arab identity, a belief that the Arabs are a single people with a shared struggle: “One people.. One Struggle..”. The phrases themselves emanate from a decades-old pan-Arab repertoire used during liberation struggles. The banner directly connects between the 1948 exodus of Palestinians and ongoing Palestinian resistance to the Egyptian Uprising. “From Palestine to Egypt,” the banner reads, “the revolution continues and will prevail.” The latter phrase has emerged in the post-Mubarak period as an insistence that the grievance of the Uprisings have yet to be
addressed. The activists designed the banner to indicate solidarity to the villagers, but also for a public and official audience. They hoped (and explicitly asked) that journalists and newspaper photographers from among the demonstrators would share their message with Arab and foreign media outlets.

But perhaps it is the manner in which the day’s less-scripted events unfolded that is more illustrative of the contentious identity of the protesters. The Omdeh’s actions and social positioning are infused with potent symbolism. In Egypt, the title Omdeh is a pre-Abdel Nasser era reference to an official governing role held generally by the heads of the largest landowning, non-absentee families in a given village. The position conceptually came along with a set of responsibilities: to provide security by overlooking a network of ghafirs, to arbitrate conflicts within the village, and to provide assistance to those in need in the form of food or finances. The title was largely abandoned in the Nasser era, when the government took over the responsibilities of the Omdeh and officially abolished titles as a nod towards egalitarian ideals. Cultural production of the Nasser-era turned the Omdeh, along with other social titles such as the Basha or the Bey, into a symbol of a tyrannical elite, facilitators of British imperial rule over Egypt. Stripped of its responsibilities, as it is used in the case of Geziret Fadel, the title is nothing but a power symbol.

The fact that the “Omdeh” introduced himself as such is an overt assertion of power. That the refugees resoundingly referred to him using the title implies some form of tacit consent—for whatever reason, be it genuine respect for the relatively educated refugee or awareness of his political connections and associated power differentials. This divide is further illustrated in the Omdeh’s manner of dress, his attempt to serve as spokesperson
for the village by literally taking center stage, and his directives at the refugees, sitting around him, to provide him with the microphone.

The power of political authorities to formulate villagers’ social conceptions did not extend simply to the manner in which the Omdeh is perceived, but to the way in which villagers conceive of themselves and their position in Egypt. Refugees resoundingly described themselves as “guests” in Egypt, as a community with no claims to any sort of rights, as people who should be thankful that the Egyptian government allows them to remain on Egyptian soil. The banner hung in the PA-built community center—an inadequate response to the legal and humanitarian concerns of the villagers—dictated for the refugees their appropriate attitude: gratefulness to the PA for any form of support offered. The community is not only denied of basic rights, but under this narrative cannot legitimately even request any rights.

While evocations of a lost homeland and the recounting of village features and family names are an important means of maintaining a Palestinian consciousness and claims to their homeland, these features also serve as a convenient distractor. For Arab political elite, they are a means of shifting all blame to foreign actors and obfuscating the role of governing powers in maintaining Palestinian dispossession and destitution. Ironically, these political actors simultaneously pay lip service to the Palestinian cause while disabling any genuine form of resistance.

A political-elite interest in maintaining the status quo is especially lucid in this case of activism. Palestinian embassy staff and the village Omdeh made a concerted effort to prevent activists from even identifying the village. The isolation of the village is not an accidental reality, it is the result of official measures to mute any form of awareness. The
role of Egyptian authorities here is implied in the Omdeh’s threat to inform intelligence services if the activists returned. Egyptian and other Arab media outlets’ refusal to shed light on the village is an effect of either 1) a belief that such an issue would not be of interest to an Egyptian or Arab public or 2) collusion in an effort to degrade popular awareness of and commitment to the Palestinian cause. The case of the more benign former possibility is itself indication of an internalization of official rhetoric conceiving of Egypt as autonomous from the Arab world and undermining “non-Egyptian” issues.

The activist visit to Geziret Fadel exposed the role of local colluders: the PA, the Omdeh, Egyptian authorities and media. Activists directly challenged the self-appointed role of the Omdeh—as village interlocutor—by literally taking over his microphone, and spending the day in the village to directly speak with the refugees, young and old. The activists refused to accept the simple conceptualization of villagers as guests with no rights, and rather than settling for expressions of gratefulness they pressed the population on actual living conditions.

In the case of the Geziret Fadel demonstration, activists explicitly expressed their contentious identity through the semi-scripted aspect of the performance: the banners, songs and procession through the village. They pulled from historical repertoires tied to pan-Arabism and Palestinian activism as well as post-Mubarak notions of an ongoing Egyptian revolution to paint a unified Arab struggle, across time and space. However, it is the non-scripted interactions—between the Omdeh and the villagers, the activists and the Omdeh, Palestinian embassy and media outlets, and the activists and the villagers—that are most revealing of the multiple power sources activists aim to challenge.

III.E Conclusion
The *Nakba* demonstration depicts a *contentious identity* that explicitly champions: 1) a notion of shared Arab identity and struggle. Implicitly, this *relational* identity includes a rejection of the “them”. This ideological other includes notions of: 1) Zionism, as the root cause of 1948 Palestinian dispossession and continued displacement 2) local facilitation of these global power relations (i.e. politically-associated elite represented here by Egyptian and Palestinian authorities, and the village *Omdeh*) 3) an Egypt-first logic as socio-cultural tool that facilitates a line of policy 4) monopolization and control of knowledge (and associated media collaboration) and 5) imposition of a discourse by powerful actors to undermine challenges to the status quo. The relational aspect between the two is clear: “they” perpetuate the dispossession and displacement of an “us”. “They” use their political power to obfuscate knowledge (here the very existence of the village) and to impose a discourse that limits possibilities for change, facilitating the continuation of a pattern of power relations.

While the *repertoire* did play an important part in explicitly laying out the *contentious identity* of activists as rooted in notions of pan-Arabism, it is the unscripted aspects of the demonstration that most potently reveal their *relational* positions. Direct encounters with figures symbolize larger power systems—between Western actors and the Arab people, between ruling Arab elites and society as a whole. It is this broad pattern of relations that activists challenge, and is why a struggle rooted in the 1948 dispossession of Palestinians can be linked to an ongoing Egyptian Uprising. The notion of continuity and shared struggle is perhaps best illustrated via a moment that took place before activists even reached Geziret Fadel, as they sat at a Cairo café waiting for the bus to load. The medical student’s drawing of an Islamist-Pharoanic figure draped in
American and Israeli symbols, and her suggestion that Egyptians, like Palestinians, “live under imperialism”, reveals a perception. Namely, this perception is that foreign hegemony—though more tangible in her physically occupied home city, Jerusalem—is one and the same in Palestine and in Egypt.
Chapter IV: Downtown Cairo Street Art

IV.A Introduction

This Chapter presents the case of a series of Downtown Cairo street murals painted by Ammar Abo Bakr, in collaboration with other street artists, between February 2012 and December 2013. Abo Bakr’s murals are not simply images—the interactive process of planning, painting, re-painting and evoking reaction and interpretation are all part of a performance. Abo Bakr paints in relation to cotemporaneous and co-spatial events, and repaints as those events develop. To him, any given mural is inextricably bound by time and space and is not a single moment that can be singly captured as a memory. It is thus that any one of Abo Bakr’s mural projects can be conceived of as an event, encapsulating the interactive process of planning, painting and reacting.

Abo Bakr’s murals elucidate a constructed contentious identity. In terms of art form and content, Abo Bakr reveals this identity in part by drawing from repertoires of contention. Beyond the murals themselves, the dynamics between Abo Bakr and fellow artists, passersby, the American University in Cairo (AUC), Egyptian authorities, the (then-politically empowered) Muslim Brotherhood, and US-based think tanks throughout the process also point to how the activist defines an “us”—the “revolutionaries”—against a set of American and Egyptian political and socio-cultural institutions and patterns of political relations.

IV.B Background I: Art and Politics

Theoretical conceptualizations of art are centered on aesthetic purpose, form and content. While contending visions on art are in and of themselves not inherently political, they do not exist in a vacuum. Art is embedded in political, economic and social relations. On a global scale, art has been used explicitly as a cultural diplomacy tool, implicitly to exert socio-cultural influence. This has been especially the case in recent decades; since the Cold War-era, the United States has championed the concept of modern art. It has discursively tied it to democratic values and promoted it alongside political and economic agendas.\textsuperscript{146}

Over recent decades, two contending visions of art have been dominant in the Arab world: a modernist view of art, backed by Western and local public and private cultural institutions, and a popularly-rooted vision of art (“citizen-art”) that pits itself as contentious to the former. A third path, one of \textit{alternative modernity} as Jessica Winegar describes it, borrowing from Timothy Mitchell, incorporates notions of modern art with traditional aspects.\textsuperscript{147} This allows artists to draw from funding opportunities dominated by Euro-American entities and channeled through local institutions, while maintaining some local legitimacy. The latter is important since, as Christa Salamandra suggests: “Arab constructs of modernity are deemed legitimate only if they seem to involve significant continuities with the Arab-Muslim past.”\textsuperscript{148} Kirsten Scheid echoes this view on \textit{alternative modernity}, by suggesting that some Arab artists internalize Western


conceptions of modern art and describe their own work in modern art terms in order to be accepted into a Euro-American dominated art world.\textsuperscript{149}

The Kantian-inspired modernist view of art, as purported by Euro-American institutions, conceptualizes art as ideally devoid of any political, social or historical significance. This line of thought suggests that art should be disinterested, without utility, uninfluenced by reality, and thus universal. Art is a form of self-expression open to wide interpretations. Modernist conceptions emphasize art form over content.\textsuperscript{150} This modernist vision of art is criticized as unfeasible, and for its ironic perpetuation of the economic and social relations it claims to escape. Pierre Bourdieu outlines the relationship between art and social class, and its selective accessibility depending on formal education. I.e. an ability to understand and speak about art, and in the particular case of modernist views “art form”, in ways deemed appropriate is a social construction. Ironically, the meaning of the artwork in modernist conceptions is especially rooted in the ability to “properly” explain and not in the artwork itself.\textsuperscript{151}

Kantian-inspired modernist views of art play a prominent role in global cultural relations. Winegar refers to an international hierarchy of art, and the assessed inferiority of Arab art for its tendency to be locality-based.\textsuperscript{152} Scheid asserts that powerful Euro-American institutions have been able to dictate to the Arab world the legitimate purpose of art: “physical force has been replaced by…a hegemonic definition of what constitutes

\textsuperscript{152} Ibid.
Western-based institutions are important for their distribution of funding, determining the type of work recognized as legitimate.\textsuperscript{154} Scheid argues that for Arab art, conformation to Western standards is not simply a matter of legitimacy, but humanity. Western institutions expect Arab artists to create work that is “aesthetic, moral, and dignified” in order to be “accepted in the human family”; any lapse into ideological expressions or violence makes the artists not only inferior, but also inhuman by Euro-American standards.\textsuperscript{155} Winegar echoes this relationship:

Middle Easterners' expression of humanity through art, the logic goes, links us to them in a bridge of understanding, because we are also human producers of art. However, this articulation of the art/humanity nexus necessarily excludes the idea that Americans might also be outside the category of the human, and engaged in anti-creative destruction... It is Middle Eastern Muslims who must be artistic in order to become human.\textsuperscript{156} Scheid and Winegar claim that many Arab artists have internalized modernist judgments of art, describing their own work in sharp contrast to violence,\textsuperscript{157} and thus (regardless of intention) actively facilitate and solidify art hierarchies.\textsuperscript{158}

Winegar points to the concept of art’s autonomy as a mask for real Western political interests in devaluing purposeful art emanating from the post-colonial world. She delineates the oppressive nature of the aesthetic and its ironic employment as a political

\textsuperscript{154} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{155} Ibid.
tool. Assessments of Arab Uprising art emanating from US policy magazines and think tanks dismiss of the political utility of the productions.

The global politicization of art extends to State-society relations. Terry Eagleton argues that political powers use culture as a masked form of coercion; this is exercised via a set of institutions and legislation that selectively support or censor art. Lisa Wedeen and Miriam Cooke demonstrate the Assad government’s use of culture as a political tool. Pahwa and Winegar reference the extensive role of Egypt’s Ministry of Culture in both supporting art institutions throughout the country, and in determining valuable art. In recent decades, such institutions have served as a channel for the flow of foreign funding, and consequentially exertion of Western socio-cultural hegemony. Modernist notions conveniently align with the interests of local State institutions, in suppressing art that is politically or socially contentious.

Popular or resistance art poses a challenge to modernist art hegemony by rooting their work in local socio-historical contexts and traditional art forms. This conception of art reject modernist visions and seeks to make purposeful art in traditional forms and with reality-based content. It aims to present art that is accessible to popular classes. Pahwa

---

159 Ibid.
162 Qanun al-Raqaba 38/1992
and Winegar refer to this conception as “citizen-art.”\textsuperscript{165} Cooke observes that citizen-art intends to express popular as opposed to individual sentiment and that the success of citizen-art depends upon its ability to resonate. Pahwa and Winegar observe that it is often this genre of art that wins popularity over “elitist” visions associated with modern art.\textsuperscript{166}

Citizen-art further conceives of art as an action and emphasizes its ability to affect change over aesthetic quality. Cooke uses the example of Syrian playwright Sadallah Wannous, who rejected commentary on the artistic form of his work: “The political cause that I was confronting did not have any particular artistic shape.” Wannous emphasized the content and utility of his work, and rejected its labeling as “dramatic art.”\textsuperscript{167} Citizen-art, as opposed to modernist visions, is expressly didactic: it is purposeful, with a clear meaning and intended audiences.\textsuperscript{168}

Colla notes that in revolutionary contexts the State’s ability to selectively support and repress art is compromised, disrupting power balances and allowing subcultures to emerge more prominently.\textsuperscript{169} The proliferation of art that came along with the Arab uprisings has received much attention. It is unique from resistance art outside of the context of major political upheaval in its more open challenge to political actors and its complete rejection of existing political systems. The art of Ammar Abo Bakr emerged in such a context of shifting power balances, and is tied closely to contending visions of art and its political, economic and social implications.

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{165} Ibid. \\
\textsuperscript{166} Ibid. \\
\textsuperscript{168} Ibid. Pg 85. \\
\textsuperscript{169} Colla, Elliot. “The People Want.” \textit{Middle East Research and Information Project}. 2012.
\end{flushleft}
IV.C Background II: Ammar Abo Bakr

Ammar Abo Bakr’s Uprising murals are informed by his pre-revolutionary experiences. Abo Bakr graduated from Luxor’s Fine Arts College in 2001; he was offered a teaching position at the institution but declined and chose instead to live in a nearby village, Mahrous. He calls his decision a rejection of the modernist-inspired approach that permeates the institution, with its prioritization of art form and detached content, and condescending views of traditional art for what it considers elementary form and reality-based imagery. He chose to relocate to a village, where some traditional arts were practiced, in order to develop a closer understanding of these forms. Abo Bakr took particular interest in hajj murals, painted by villagers on fences and the exterior of homes to greet community members returning from the Muslim pilgrimage. He also took interest in the artistic expressions from Sufi gatherings and festivals. Abo Bakr particularly noted the role of the crowd in such Sufi festivals as important in shaping the artistic process: “I was attracted to art of Sufi gatherings, because the crowd creates a remarkable energy, the type of energy we see now in the revolution.”

Abo Bakr notes that many rural artistic traditions are deteriorating; he attributes this to a range of post-colonial policies that neglected agriculture and rural livelihoods, spurred urbanization, and devalued traditional art. The artist observes that the time period coincided with a decline of the village aesthetic, ranging from traditional architectural forms to communal celebrations. Along with a group of other artists, Abo Bakr studied these arts in an effort to preserve village traditions. While Abo Bakr travelled to European cities and participated in a gallery, he generally did not take part in formal art

---

events due to his rejection of modernist-inspired conceptions promoted by Western and Egyptian institutions and academia:

I found that a lot of traditions were being destroyed, and paying attention to this, for me, was far more important than making murals or modern art and competing at galleries. I was not thinking along those lines. I did travel, I visited France in 2009, and yes I went to museums and art institutions and learned. But still, I returned and continued on the same path and remained committed to the idea of immersing myself in my locality, inside the village and the depth of it, and not to run after the modern.171

Here, the artist makes clear his interest in exerting effort to preserve traditional art forms over the type of art supported by mainstream institutions in Egypt and the West.

Abo Bakr became active in the Egyptian Uprising in its early days. He travelled to Cairo’s Tahrir Square in late January of 2011. There, he met with activists who advised him to return to Luxor and mobilize action, however small, in his hometown. Abo Bakr’s self-defined first act of protest art was on the train from Cairo to Luxor, where he scribbled messages like “traitor” or “remain steadfast”; he hoped that the messages would spark dialogue and encourage action among commuters. In Luxor, he continued to write slogans and use stenciled images during the initial 18 days and beyond. It was not until March of 2012, when he travelled to Cairo to paint a set of murals on Mohamed Mahmoud Street, that Abo Bakr began working on the series of art that has made him among the most preeminent protest artists of the Egyptian Uprising.

IV.D Background III: Mohamed Mahmoud Street

As Abo Bakr’s work is tied to time and space, it is important to contextualize the paintings within post-Mubarak activism and in relation to the location of the artist’s work: Mohamed Mahmoud Street. Activists opposed to the rule of the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) continued to protest in Downtown Cairo after the fall of

171 Ibid.
Mubarak. One of these early post-Mubarak protests, in March of 2011, was quelled violently, and ended with the gathering and torturing of demonstrators inside of the Egyptian National Museum off of Tahrir Square. The months that followed witnessed the eruption of increasingly violent demonstrations. In November and December of 2011, protests on Mohamed Mahmoud Street left dozens of activists dead. Between November and February, the SCAF government erected eight cement walls as well as several barbed wire barriers and security checkpoints throughout Downtown Cairo, claiming security purposes. In February of 2012, over seventy Ahly Club fans, known for their political activism and participation in the Mohamed Mahmoud protests, were killed in a soccer match at Port Said stadium.172

These incidences of confrontation are central to the history of protest form and space dynamics in Downtown Cairo. The Mohamed Mahmoud clashes of November 2011 were a turning point in the type of protester confrontation with government forces. In contrast to larger protests centered in Tahrir Square, Mohamed Mahmoud Street became a clear front line where protesters, often with bricks, rocks or Molotov cocktails in hand, went to confront security officers armed with tear gas and live, rubber and khartoush bullets. At certain points of the “battle” security forces called for a hudna or a ceasefire during which they re-armed or erected barricades, from behind which they targeted protesters.173 By February of 2012, eight barricades had been constructed. The walls, impenetrable by vehicle or foot, stood isolating parts of downtown Cairo and posed a great inconvenience to the residents of an already congested Cairo, who found themselves circling blocks to

reach a destination just across a wall. The walls were a point of great contention; some climbed over them, others attempted to knock them down.\footnote{Abaza, Mona. “Walls, Segregating Downtown Cairo and the Mohammed Mahmud Street Graffiti.” \textit{Theory, Culture & Society}. October 9, 2012.}

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{barricades_in_downtown_cairo.png}
\caption{Barricades in Downtown Cairo\footnote{Trew, Bel, Mohamed Abdalla, and Ahmed Feteha. “Walled in: SCAF’s Concrete Barricades>” \textit{AhramOnline}. February 9, 2012. <http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/1/64/33929/Egypt/Politics-/Walled-in-SCAFs-concrete-barricades-.aspx>}}
\end{figure}

In the Cairene context, these walls prompted comparisons, by passersby and activists, to the far more egregious barriers that cut through the Palestinian West Bank. Those walking past the barricades, or attempting to drive around them, would often ask in sarcasm whether they were in Palestine.\footnote{Abo Bakr, Ammar Protest Artist. Telephone Interview. November 24, 2012.} Protesters looked back at their struggle, one of uneven power and “ceasefires” called only as an excuse to rearm and further isolate protesters, and saw the struggle of Palestinians. They capitalized on the symbolism, by drawing direct comparisons between Field Marshal Hussein Tantawi and Israel in chants.

The existence of the walls further allowed activists to draw potently from Palestinian protest experiences. Abo Bakr’s first piece of work on these walls, in the midst of the
fighting, was a Quranic verse that he quickly scribbled. The verse refers to the cowardice of forces that target their victims from behind walls; it is often used in the Palestinian context.

When fighting quelled by March of 2012 and police and security forces had altogether retreated from the area marked by the barriers, a new opportunity emerged. Protest artists who had mostly used stencils or quickly scribbled messages on walls to avoid arrest or torture could now spend more time painting without threat. Mohamed Mahmoud Street as well as the SCAF-constructed barriers themselves became sites of elaborate paintings. The Street and remaining or re-built walls continued to be a center for contentious paintings during the presidency of Mohamed Morsi, and currently under acting president Adly Mansour. While security forces or disgruntled opponents frequently whitewashed paintings, the overall lack of official forces in the vicinity of Tahrir Square gave activists leeway to paint and repaint as they wished.

**IV.E Case: Downtown Cairo Street Art**

Ammar Abo Bakr began painting murals on Mohamed Mahmoud Street in March of 2012, to mark the first anniversary of the torturing of protesters in the Egyptian National Museum. The initiative was carried out in collaboration between Abo Bakr and other protest artists. Many of Abo Bakr’s March 2012 works on Mohamed Mahmoud Street feature iconography of *martyrs*. Abo Bakr painted images of those killed in the Port Said football match on the exterior fence of the AUC. The artist drew the youth in portrait form, clad with wings common in Coptic martyrdom iconography.

---


(The verse, suggested by Azhar graduate Ahmed Abu Al-Hassan and written by Abo Bakr, is: Al-Hashr, 59:14)
Another one of Abo Bakr’s martyr images, on the AUC library exterior, depicts the Azhar Scholar Emad Effat with Quranic verses beside him. Effat was killed in December 2011 protests. The scholar carries weighty symbolism in SCAF-era activism; his funeral procession drew thousands and created a rare scene in the typically conservative Azhar Mufti’s call to action. In the painting, Abo Bakr depicts Effat in his Azhar dress. Here, Abo Bakr says, he is reminding people of Al-Azhar’s greater past and the revolutionary role that it once played. Effat is clad with colorful wings, borrowed again by Abo Bakr from Coptic heritage.

---


Abo Bakr selected the Quranic verses painted beside Effat based on an interaction one of his fellow protest artists, Alaa Awad, witnessed between a “citizen” and a parliamentarian affiliated with the MB. Awad told Abo Bakr about the incident in one of the many meetings the protesters had during the painting process, to brainstorm ideas. At the time, Abo Bakr explains, MB parliamentarians stood firmly in support of SCAF, denying that official forces were attacking protesters. The citizen approached the MP as he neared the Parliament building, and read to him the following Quranic verses:

And they would say: Our Lord, we obeyed our chiefs and our great ones, and they have misled us as to the (right path). Our Lord, give them double the penalty and curse them with a very great curse. (Al-Ahzab 33:67-68)\(^{183}\)

The verses are a part of a passage that represents those who follow orders regardless of their virtue. To Abo Bakr, the meaning is clear: “do not just follow your leaders like

\(^{181}\) Ibid.


sheep." The artist notes that the passage is significant because it denies Islamist actors the sole right to use religion: “I am Muslim, and it is my right to cite the Quran just as the Islamists do. The text is clear, let it be the judge.” While most of Abo Bakr’s paintings were whitewashed at some point, the Quranic verses remained highly resistant to alteration due to a taboo against defacing religious text.

Abo Bakr’s paintings on the SCAF-constructed barricades took a different form. The protest artists jointly collaborated on the series of walls, and chose to cover them with murals of realistic imagery of the scenes that the barriers obfuscate. They painted a mock street plaque, labeling the area as the “Street with no Walls”. Abo Bakr explains that the initiative sought to symbolize the obsoleteness of the walls. One of the collaborative pieces that Abo Bakr contributed to is the Sheikh Rehan Street barrier, adjacent to the front entrance of the AUC.

---

185 Ibid.
186 Ibid.
187 Ibid.
One of the other realistic wall murals painted by the group depicts the entrance to the Ministry of Interior. Painted beneath the Ministry’s seal is Palestinian cartoonist Naji al-Ali’s famous character, Handala. On the barricade, Handala’s hand is drawn clenched behind his back, and the other raising a sword topped with ink, as Ali had frequently drawn him.

---

188 Photograph by Author, March 2012.
Another image Abo Bakr painted on Mohamed Mahmoud Street features rural characters. The figures are clad in rural dress and carry arms. When prompted on the question of artistic form, Abo Bakr often replies by referencing this image:

If you really want to talk about our artistic form, it is completely clear. It is shaped by what we were doing before the revolution. And it has to do with this issue of identity, and what we are losing of it…The Egyptian village until just thirty or forty years ago had a village artist. On the day that pilgrims stand on Mount Arafat, the village artists comes out to the street and depicts this through drawing. And so on, he works on other issues as well. I tried to represent this through the images of popular class people wearing traditional clothing and carrying arms.190

Figure 14: Rural Resistance191

Abo Bakr’s paintings garnered attention from a number of actors. As the AUC’s walls underwent elaborate transformations, its administrators and professors reacted. They launched a campaign calling for the preservation of pieces that “commemorate those who lost their lives during the revolution and recent uprisings.”192 One AUC professor suggested that in acting to preserve the pieces, the University had “succumbed

---

189 Photograph by Author, March 2012.
190 “Visualizing Revolution: The Epic Murals of Tahrir.” news@auc. April 2012.
191 Photograph by Author. March 2012.
to pressure from the street and its own faculty to preserve the mural and prevent
government workers from removing it.” AUC statements and its professors’ writings
describe Mohamed Mahmoud as a “memorial space.” They referred to passersby who
posed for photographs before the walls, treating the paintings as memorials. AUC
Professor Mona Abaza noted the significance of this and recalled that the paintings
sparked dialogue on “memories of the revolution.” The University’s security guards
attempted to avert the whitewashing of the murals by opponents or State officials (and
were praised by AUC faculty for doing so).

Professor Soraya Morayef of the AUC, one of the advocates for preservation, called
the whitewashing of the walls that took place under the Morsi government an “inhumane
act” which wiped away a “magnificent mural” and the memory of the past that it
depicted; it was an act of “erasing a visual historical archive.” Morayef emphasized the
amount of time, paint, financial expenses and equipment that went into the drawing of the
murals. The University administration described the whitewashing as a loss of “art” in
a “legitimate artistic space.” Statements by AUC faculty members equated the erasing of
the murals with an attempt to wipe away the memory of the martyrs and depleting a form
of art, “self-expression,” important to the history of popular art forms in Egypt.

The Mohamed Mahmoud Street murals also became a focal point for American think
tanks. The Research and Development Corporation (RAND) produced a report entitled

---

whitewashing-cairos-memory-past>
194 Abaza, Mona. “Walls, Segregating Downtown Cairo and the Mohammed Mahmud Street Graffiti.”
195 Ibid. Pg 15
197 “Preserving Mohamed Mahmoud Murals.” News@AUC. March 6, 2012.
“Artists and the Arab Uprisings.” The report explains, in the introduction, that it uses the term Uprisings to “avoid the potentially overly optimistic connotation that *Arab Spring* implies.” The Sheikh Rehan Street barricade mural is featured on the front cover of the report. The document describes the protest art as a struggle by proponents of “freedom of speech” against government authorities and extremist forces. This freedom of expression is described as an important part of “democratic reform”, thus RAND’s interest in its promotion. The document also references the history of US art promotion efforts in the Cold War era, on the logical grounds that encouraging “liberal” artistic expression would “undermine the intellectual foundation of communist societies.” The report recommends the promotion of art by increasing the financial incentive to pursue art—and links its recommendations directly with its other efforts to encourage entrepreneurship in Egypt.\footnote{Schwartz, Lowell et all. “Artists and the Arab Uprisings.” RAND Corporation. 2013.}

An April 2012 lecture at the AUC’s Downtown Cairo campus featured Abo Bakr along with fellow protest artists Alaa Awad and Hanaa El-Degham. At the lecture, Abo Bakr publicly rejected the University’s focus on artistic aspects of his work and the preservation efforts. Abo Bakr referred to the murals as a collaborative process, involving not only himself and other artists, but passersby from the “street”; he said it would thus be “selfish” for him to sit and talk about his art form and style when it is not solely his work. Abo Bakr further emphasized the role of the pieces as acts of protest rather than “art”:

> We did not come out to make art. We are revolutionaries, who happen to have certain expertise, and so we employ that expertise for the revolution...You can sit and talk about art form, but in the beginning and in the end what we are doing is defending the Egyptian identity, which has been stolen over time...This is what the revolution rose for.\footnote{“Visualizing Revolution: The Epic Murals of Tahrir.” *news@auc*. April 2012.}
Abo Bakr referred to the AUC’s preservation efforts as a “waste”:

Does the preservation of the wall guarantee to me that nothing else will happen in Mohamed Mahmoud? I don’t think so. Things can happen at any moment, and we artists, or someone else, anyone, can come and paint. So I see preservation as an effort that has no meaning. With all respect to the AUC and their efforts…We understand very well that the professors here are appraising our work artistically, or in terms of technique or form or whatever you want to call it, but this, the idea of preservation, is an illogical idea in the street.  

At the same lecture, Alaa Awad, a fellow artist who painted Pharaonic imagery on Mohamed Mahmoud Street, disagreed with Abo Bakr. He praised the AUC effort to preserve his pieces, calling them important artworks, meant to “keep Pharaonic traditions alive.” In the weeks after the April lecture, Abo Bakr re-painted over his own work (and that of the other artists, including Awad), thus preventing the preservation effort from continuing.

A prominent case in which Abo Bakr drew atop of Mohamed Mahmoud paintings was during 2012 presidential elections season. Abo Bakr explains that this mural was prompted by people’s concern over the voting processes and how it had distracted them from the “real purpose” of the revolution. To the artist, the re-painting was symbolic; Abo Bakr drew “on top of the images of the martyrs, just as now people have forgotten the martyrs and are busy putting up pictures of the [presidential] candidates.” He painted in large, black lettering: “Forget the Past/Dead, Stick with Elections.”

---

200 Ibid.
Throughout the remaining period of SCAF rule and under the Morsi presidency, Abo Bakr’s work was whitewashed by disgruntled opponents, and by authorities. At times, Abo Bakr re-painted the exact image: “Just to spite them. How can they refuse the memory of the martyr?” In response to the first major whitewashing of his work during the Morsi Presidency, Abo Bakr painted a taunting face, with the text: “Erase More, Cowardly Regime.” The painting of this image drew two thousand activists to Mohamed Mahmoud Street, and was one of the first protests of Morsi’s time in office.

---

204 “Visualizing Revolution: The Epic Murals of Tahrir.” news@auc. April 2012.
With the end of the Morsi presidency, Abo Bakr left Mohamed Mahmoud Street and began a separate project in nearby Qasr il-Aini Street. He explains that his physical move is due to the different nature of this work, which is not meant to directly mobilize. Rather, it is meant to present something to the people: “I also want to present something of beauty to people who can see it, see that their streets have beautiful murals and feel joy.” The Qasr il-Aini mural features an image of a woman. Abo Bakr describes her features as contemporary, her braids as peasantry, and her make-up as Pharaonic. A necklace around her neck begins with hieroglyphic figures that morph into Arabic calligraphy. The text beside the image, Abo Bakr explains, is a line of poetry that refers to a rural tradition of applying kohl on newborns’ faces: “When my eyes first opened, before my mother knew me, they painted kohl to my cheeks, so that I would resemble my monuments.”

Abo Bakr continued to work on the mural through the summer of 2013, and for that time period refrained from mobilizing action despite his personal political stance because he felt it would betray the popular current.

Figure 16: "Erase More"206


IV.F Analysis

The main accusation that Abo Bakr levels at the Mubarak-era is cultural neglect, “stealing identity.” He suggests that academic and cultural institutions’ valuation of and support for modernist-inspired art had the effect of degrading the development of traditional art expressions, and takes action to reject this degradation. Abo Bakr’s pre-revolutionary choice to turn down a university position in order to learn about and preserve the traditions of rural Egypt was a rejection of modernist paradigms, and their condescending views of local art. Abo Bakr makes explicit references to the global and institutional nature of this art hegemony, by identifying modern art with “European cities” and galleries, and Egyptian universities and galleries. Abo Bakr’s confrontation with the AUC over the significance of his work further reflects his positioning as a citizen-artist, and the importance of this in a revolutionary context. Abo Bakr’s self-alignment as a

\[208\] Image provided by artist.
citizen-artist is further a means of gaining legitimacy as a representative of popular classes. This positioning can be explored along three axes: art purpose, form and content.

In terms of art purpose, Abo Bakr lucidly identifies his work as an action within the context of the revolution. To Abo Bakr, the murals were not meant to be ephemeral; they were painted with the intention of accomplishing a specific goal. He intended for his murals to be developed and painted atop of as political developments call for tailored reactions:

We are painting to break this idea that people have of graffiti as simply a tableau or beautiful portrait. Here, we are not making art as it is understood and presented in galleries and such, what we are doing is a form of resistance. Everyone began showing interest in our work, and the American University became protective of it and wanted to preserve it. This wall, of Mohamed Mahmoud, when we came in the beginning and drew the pictures of the martyrs we did not ask anyone or take anyone’s permission...now, we are coming in this situation, and doing it again. We are covering our past paintings with new ones.209

In addition this statement, Abo Bakr’s comments at the AUC lecture, on how the works are actions in response to events, are a clear rejection of the notion that his murals are simply images. Abo Bakr’s re-painting atop of his own work is meant to illustrate this point.

To Abo Bakr, the interactive process that yields a given mural and continues in its aftermath is part of the action itself. At the AUC lecture, Abo Bakr explicitly thanked anyone who was part of the process, including passersby who stopped to help or talk with the artists, as important participants. The artist emphasized the importance of collaboration, and the impossibility of producing contentious art in isolation:

As an individual, as Ammar, I can do nothing on my own. I cannot paint a mural in one night. I cannot go at midnight and end up with an entire wall painted by six in the morning. And then there is the energy created by working collectively.\textsuperscript{210}

For Abo Bakr, his paintings are above all an act of collective resistance, shaped by political circumstance and social interactions. The ideas for many of his paintings are some combination of suggestions from others, whether fellow protesters or passersby. His works are not stagnant, both the artist himself and opposing forces regularly transform the street murals.

The AUC, by focusing on the aesthetic aspects and the historical value of the pieces, referencing them as works of “self-expression,” and deeming Mohamed Mahmoud an artistic space, strips the protest art of its real power as an act of opposition in and of itself, a claiming of public space for political rather than artistic purposes, and a mobilizing force. That the AUC, like other local academic institutions, promotes this artistic paradigm is unsurprising. Abo Bakr, while giving a lecture at the AUC itself, rejected the effort as missing the point of his work entirely. Abo Bakr does recognize that some perceive his murals as memorials—a “misinterpretation” he says.\textsuperscript{211} Abo Bakr’s work is explicitly political or socio-cultural, and expressly \textit{didactic}: his street murals have: 1) a clear meaning, which he explains and develops in conversations with passersby throughout the long process of painting elaborate murals, and 2) clear target audiences.

In addition to serving as a contentious action, a second purpose of Abo Bakr’s work is to represent the collective interest. He does this by tactically making his work accessible, and by rooting his artistic form and content in popular tradition. Abo Bakr identifies himself with the people, and says that his work is an expression of the street rather than

\textsuperscript{210} Abo Bakr, Ammar Protest Artist. Telephone Interview. November 21, 2013.
himself as an individual: “We are with the street, we are with those who paid with their lives for freedom, and that is all.” One of the main reasons Abo Bakr, who had drawn graffiti throughout the ongoing Uprising, chose to draw more elaborately was that it would increase the street presence of the protest artists and allow passersby in a busy part of Cairo to stop and engage in dialogue with the protesters, drawing more people to their cause and positioning himself as among the people.

By making art that is publicly accessible, Abo Bakr rejects the financial valuation of art and the social implications that this carries. Here, again, Abo Bakr is positioning his work among popular classes. The productions of US think tanks, which feature the work of Abo Bakr in policy recommendations on artistic entrepreneurship, simply usurps the popularity of the artist’s work while completely contradicting the purpose and meaning of his art. The RAND report directly ties the art, which it considers a “liberal” form of self-expression, to “liberal” political and economic practices, i.e. democracy and neo-liberal reforms. RAND took the images produced by artists, considered them in isolation of time and space, and cast them within a framework that allows for continuity of a socio-cultural hegemony that underpins a pattern of political and economic relations between the US and Arab world.

Abo Bakr’s art form, and the manner in which he speaks about it, also serves his dual, intertwined purpose of confronting modernist hegemony and rooting himself among popular classes. Abo Bakr is reluctant to speak about art form. He underscores its value in order to emphasize the role of his work as an action rather than image: “I often remind people that what we are doing is not art, and ask them to leave us be. Don’t waste your

---

212 Ibid.
time analyzing our painting style or trying to transform it into a portrait.”

Abo Bakr noted that the aesthetic quality of his work was not done out of artistic ambition but is important because “revolutions rise against ugliness….ugliness is what allowed Mubarak to think like he did.”

Similarly, his repeated answer on material used is simply that they are cheap materials, “the cheapest in the market”, with no elaboration. Abo Bakr emphasizes that the work is not meant to be reflective of his artistic talents; to him, it is a simple piece of work done using inexpensive painting materials primarily to make a point. “If I wanted my pieces to be long lasting,” Abo Bakr said, “I could have easily used better paints.”

Clearly, the form of his work matters—it too has a purpose and increases resonance. By speaking about form in this way, however, Abo Bakr is rejecting modernist emphasis on form and again reaffirming his position among popular classes, by simplifying the artistic process and refusing to engage in inaccessible jargon.

When pressed on art form, Abo Bakr does refer to the village artists and their hajj murals as inspiring the technique of his work. Again, he does not delve into specifics of what this means, likely in order to avoid engaging in discussions focused on form and to avoid discussing isolating technicalities. In addition to traditional art forms, another noticeable technique used by Abo Bakr and fellow artists on the cement barricades is trompe l’oeil: the portrayal of realistic images of scenery. The technique, here, is borrowed from a Palestinian repertoire of contention used on West Bank barricades. The form is particularly fitting in this context. It aids the artists’ attempt to draw comparisons between SCAF brutality, and that inflicted upon the Palestinians. Common popular

---

214 Ibid.
215 Ibid.
consensus on the egregiousness of the latter allows protesters to more clearly make their case against SCAF to the general population.217

In terms of art content, Abo Bakr again rejects modernist paradigms by featuring reality-based content, and roots himself in the popular by incorporating traditional symbolism. Abo Bakr defines the use of traditional repertoires as central to his main goal, and what he calls the main goal of the revolution, of searching for and asserting Egyptian identity. The artist blasts the Mubarak regime for attempting to deface Egyptian culture and identity, to turn it into something “shapeless” and “tasteless.”218 In describing the content of his artwork, Abo Bakr says: “Egypt is six thousand years of history, and we are embracing all of it. Different actors express one part of our identity at the expense of others, or claim the sole right to use certain traditions, but we are defending our culture in its entirety.”219

Abo Bakr’s works borrow from a wide range of local traditions and resistance customs. The martyrs he paints are often clad with wings inspired by Coptic imagery, a sign of defiance from the era of Roman persecutions. Abo Bakr also frequently paints select and provocative Quranic verses or poetic lines; this resembles village practices of painting religious text on walls, pulls directly from a Palestinian repertoire of contention, and roots the artist’s work in local tradition. Through the Emad Effat piece, Abo Bakr is claiming the right to use such traditions: in the face of artistic hegemony that devalues such depictions, and in the face of political actors who claim exclusive authority over aspects of Egyptian culture.

Borrowing content from a Palestinian *repertoire*, particularly on the cement barricade, allows the artists to capitalize on visual resemblances between the Downtown Cairo and West Bank walls. The resounding perception that the latter is unjust allows the artists to draw a comparison between SCAF and Israeli authorities, Palestinian oppression and the treatment of Egyptian protesters. Abo Bakr’s first act of writing a Quranic phrase often evoked in the Palestinian context allows for this, as does the groups’ decision to realistic imagery, again part of a *repertoire* used on West Bank walls. The painting of Handala on the barricade leading to the Ministry of Interior emphasizes this point. The well-known cartoon figure is drawn always standing before a scene of oppression; here the MOI is itself that symbol of oppression. His ink-topped sword, as al-Ali used it, is an indicator of the superiority of protesters’ ideals over the force of their suppressors. By using Handala, the painters were able to convey a weighty message impossible to depict without relying on well-known *repertoires*.

Another *repertoire of contention* that Abo Bakr draws from is Suez Canal zone resistance culture. In the post-1967 war era, Suez cities were thrust to the frontlines of war as Israel occupied Sinai. A popular resistance formed, when civilians took up arms to defend their homes. Suez folk traditions gained widespread popularity within Arab spheres during this era. Abo Bakr’s imagery of rural figures carrying arms resembles these Suez traditions. The figure carrying the radio further confirms this identification since popular Arab resistance fighters, *fida’yeen*, relied on the radio, over which the Egyptian government would send coded messages at certain hours of the day. These figures remain a symbol of the power of popular resistance, despite power differentials—

---

a message Abo Bakr is able to convey by drawing from a repertoire. Again, the images have multiple purposes: of portraying a message, of rooting the artist in folk traditions in order to identify with the popular and elucidate an aspect of “Egyptian identity,” and of rejecting modernist paradigms.

Abo Bakr’s painting on Qasr il-Aini Street borrows from a range of repertoires. This allows Abo Bakr to clarify his main motive: the search for and expression of a local identity, with its multiple faces. The physical location of the piece away from Mohamed Mahmoud Street is due to the violent nature of the history of that space and his choice to only focus on pieces directly related to martyrs in that location. The Qasr il-Aini Street mural highlights the aspect of Abo Bakr’s goal that addresses not simply immediate grievances, like the call for justice for martyrs, but his macro-grievance relating to what he calls a stolen identity.

**IV.G Conclusion**

Through the interactive process of planning, painting, evoking reactions, and repainting in Downtown Cairo, Abo Bakr presents a contentious identity that constitutes the following elements: 1) populist socio-cultural traditions 2) populist socio-economic classes 3) a shared struggle to resist foreign hegemony across Arab time and space. This relational identity includes a rejection of the “them”, which encompasses notions of: 1) Western socio-cultural hegemony, and the political and economic relations in which it is embedded (here it is modern art, but the pattern of socio-cultural hegemony that devalues local culture is more broad) 2) local facilitators and solidifiers of this socio-cultural hegemony, often representative of political and socio-economic elite (here, this includes academic institutions, art galleries, and fellow protest artists) and 3) a rejection of the
foreign imposition and local internalization of a discourse that facilitates tacit consent of socio-cultural hegemony (here, the artist’s rejection of any description of his work in ‘modern art terms’). The relations that Abo Bakr lays out in his construction of a contentious identity are not a matter of individuals; rather, they are part of a systematic pattern that facilitates hierarchal control over a population.

Abo Bakr’s use of the repertoire elucidates the existence of this pattern of power relations across Arab time and space. By borrowing from local traditions, especially a popular resistance repertoire from the Suez Canal zone and from Palestine, the murals tie the physical force of outside powers with the physical force of local actors, and to the socio-cultural struggle in the art realm. At the core, Abo Bakr’s work contests the attempt to devalue and undermine popular identity as a means of maintaining control political, economic and physical control. He explicitly recognizes the continuity of this struggle across time: “What we are doing is defending the Egyptian identity, stolen over time. Our confrontation with the military is not just over power, or is not just over their killing of people, our confrontation with them has a history.”

Beyond the repertoire, the direct encounter between the protest artist and symbols of larger power systems—the AUC and US-based think tanks in particular—elucidate the contentious identity formed by Abo Bakr and his work throughout the process. Even as Abo Bakr painted to unhinge these relations of domination, institutions continued to usurp his work within a modernist framework and overlook its political and socio-cultural power as an act of resistance. Abo Bakr “respectfully” but forcefully rejected the AUC’s, and even fellow protest artist’s, attempts to cast revolutionary street art in modern art

---

221 “Visualizing Revolution: The Epic Murals of Tahrir.” news@auc. April 2012.
terms. While these figures may not completely adhere to modernist paradigms, and straddle what Winegar refers to as an *alternative modernity*, they remain facilitators and solidifiers of a global art hierarchy. It is this pattern of socio-cultural relations and the political and economic implications with which they are associated that Abo Bakr’s work defies. Again, he explicitly recognizes this larger revolutionary mission and the attempt to maintain continuity despite procedural change: “The revolution has nothing to do with political parties, it has nothing to do with ballot boxes, it has nothing to do with a Committee of Fifty or a Committee of Sixty. It has nothing to do with any of these political things. The revolution is something else entirely.”

---

Conclusion

The three cases of contentious performances from the Arab Uprisings presented in this thesis point to the multi-dimensional aspects of the movement, the ideological targets of which span time and space. In the broadest sense, the three cases of demonstration point to a *contentious identity* that includes elements of: 1) pan-Arabism 2) economic independence and socio-economic justice and 3) the value of local culture. This identity is relational, pitted against a power source that maintains its hegemony via: 1) notions of native socio-cultural inadequacy 2) economic exploitation and socio-economic stratification and 3) political control and manipulation. The power source includes foreign actors and their local colluders, political elite, who facilitate and solidify this system. Arab Uprising activists did not construct this identity anew; rather they activated a pre-existing identity, and continue to develop upon it through their protest actions. The identity constitutes a pattern of relations—between foreign actors and the Arab people, between Arab elite and society as a whole.

The historical-rootedness of such patterns of power relations, what Edward Said refers to as *imperial continuity*, enabled activists to use and expand upon existing notions of a *contentious identity*. Activists did this primarily by drawing from a shared *repertoire of contention*, a decades-old set of cultural productions used to battle various forms of Western political, economic and socio-cultural hegemony and local political elite, facilitators of such power relations. The *repertoire* remains relevant because the power relations that they were used to contest remain. In addition to the *repertoire*, unscripted elements of the demonstrations were revealing of contentious identity. Specifically, interjections by representatives of power sources into the demonstrations as an attempt to
reshape the narrative of the individual protest elucidate the boundaries that separate the claims of contentious actors and existing power structures.

Of the cases, the Tunisian UGET protest is perhaps the most lucid assertion of the three broad aspects of contentious identity: pan-Arabism, economic independence and socio-economic justice, and the value of Arab-Islamic culture. The activists portrayed shared Arab struggle, across the region and throughout time, by borrowing from a protest repertoire. This repertoire is rooted in mid-twentieth century anti-imperial struggles, and ongoing Palestinian resistance. Other protest materials point specifically to the economic aspects of the grievances: a pamphlet identifying the role of the IMF in Tunisia, the iconic image of a struggling Tunisian farmer, and a decades-old song by Egyptian duo Ahmed Fouad Negm and Sheikh Imam that points to the socio-economic impact of economic liberalization.

The commemoration of the Palestinian Nakba in Geziret Fadel, Egypt also elucidates the notion of shared Arab struggle, across time and space. This is done explicitly through protest materials that draw slogans from a pan-Arab repertoire. However, the demonstration illustrates contentious identity in further depth, through the un-scripted dynamics between activists and villagers, and activists and power figures. The manner in which local authorities interjected during the demonstration, to obfuscate knowledge on the village and prevent communication between activists and villagers, highlights their role in maintaining a status quo. Further, the ability of such authorities to spread their discourse among the refugee population points to an additional tool used to provoke tacit consent to existing power relations. While the root of the villagers’ problem is foreign aggression—they were and remain displaced and dispossessed due to 1948 Zionist
force—the role of local political elite in controlling knowledge and discourse to undermine change is lucid.

Through the process of planning, painting, evoking reactions, and repainting in Downtown Cairo, Abo Bakr’s protest actions present a contentious identity that celebrates populist notions, on the cultural and economic front. Abo Bakr draws from a popular repertoire that evokes historical Arab struggle. This identity is presented relationally against a multitude of forces: Western socio-cultural hegemony, and the political and economic relations in which it is embedded, and the local elite who facilitates and solidifies these power relations. While the repertoire does contribute to Abo Bakr’s activation of a contentious identity, it is the un-scripted interactions between Abo Bakr and various power sources that add depth to the nature of the power relations against which the artist acts.

Contending narratives on the Arab Uprisings have at the core different conceptualizations of time and space. The prominent and one-dimensional narrative that has emerged imagines events as occurring within bounded nation-states, along discrete temporal phases that lead to progress. The narrative that emerges from such underlying approaches is highly flawed; it misses the multi-dimensional nature of a movement, the grievances of which span time and space. These three cases of Arab Uprising activism all draw from a shared repertoire to activate and develop upon a contentious identity that challenges the ideological underpinnings of the dominating power system in the Arab world.
Appendix

شيد قصورك ع المزارع
من كنا وعمل إديتنا
الخمارات جنب المصانع
والسجن مطرح الجنينة
واطلق كلا بك
في الشوارع
واقفل زنازينك
علينا
وقل نوننا في المسايع
أدي احنا
نمنا ما اشتهينا
واقفل علينا بالمواجع
احنا اتوجبنا
واكتفينا
وعرفنا
من سبب جراحنا
وعرفنا روحتنا
والتيتنا
عمال وفلاحين
وطلبة
دقت ساعتنا
وابدتنا
نسلك طريق
مالهش راجع
والنصر قريب من عنينا
النصر أقرب
من إدينا


Ammar Abo Bakr.” *FreshMilkArt.* <http://art.freshmilk.tv/streetart/ammar-abo/>


Lust, Ellen. “‘Turning to the Local: Potential Opportunities for Research, Scholarship and Programming on Development.” Middle East Political Science. June 12, 2012.


McAdam, Doug et al. Comparative Perspectives on Social Movements: Political Opportunities, Mobilizing Structures and Cultural Framings. Cambridge University Press: 1996.


**Arabic Language Sources**


“Bassem Youssef Show Al-Haliqa I.” March 8, 2011. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eXAANOZ5t9w>


“Qanun al-Raqaba 38/1992”

“Thawrat al dakhiliyya ‘ala graffiti al thawra.”
<http://www.elwadynews.com/print.php?id=45333>

**Interviews**


