



SEEING LIKE TAHRIR SQUARE

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INTRODUCTION



"Sometimes I am afraid that we become just a memory, we get away from you (the Square) then the idea dies and fades away, and we go back to forget what happened, and you (The Square) become a story to tell in narrations"¹

While I was carefully planning my essay, a particular song became my constant companion, inspiring and guiding me along the way. To share this inspiration, I have included a link to the video with translated lyrics by the end of my story.

From the very beginning of the seminar, I instinctively chose Cairo as the city to apply different lenses and examine urban practices. This choice stemmed from my personal experience living in Cairo and the realization that every text we studied triggered memories and sparked relevant discussions about the city. With each class, my conviction about this choice grew stronger. By the end of the seminar, it became clear to me why I had chosen Cairo—I was not merely an observer but an integral part of the narrative. I possessed the ability to utilize various lenses and tap into my stored memories, much like the black box of an airplane. These memories were awakened as I encountered Malmström's text on Tahrir Square. (Malmström, 2019)

Duff (2010, p. 881) accurately points out that truly experiencing a place involves not only being profoundly influenced by it but also actively engaging with the tactical opportunities and practical resources it offers. One such place that deeply impacted countless individuals, including myself, was Tahrir Square. Whether it was Nur, Fatma², or numerous other Egyptians, we all shared the dream of freedom for the first time. Tahrir Square served as the space that united us, creating **memories** that now call for **remembrance**. Therefore, it is imperative to present Tahrir Square through various lenses, during the span of 18 days.

This essay will provide four snapshots of Tahrir Square during the Egyptian Revolution. We will begin with January 25th, 2011 and progress through the 28th, February 2nd, and finally conclude with the 11th. Within each day, I will offer my perspective on Tahrir Square, considering my own **positionality** during those moments. I will focus on the prevailing **urban practices** observed each day, followed by an examination of the **wordings** employed by the protesters.

Throughout the 18 days, the evolving wording used by the protesters provides valuable insight. Initially, their message centered around three simple yet profound words: "Bread, Freedom, Social Justice." Over time, it transformed into "peaceful" and eventually culminated in "The Nation's will is to overthrow the regime," and finally "The Nation is done with overthrowing the regime."

Tahrir Square, in essence, acted as an entire **city** within itself. Despite its physical location remaining un/changed, each snapshot revealed different urban practices and lenses through which we could view a different Tahrir Square.

¹ Al-Midan song for an Egyptian famous rock band, Al-Midan means The Square.

² See Malmström text

"Officials of the modern state are, of necessity, at least one step-and often several steps-removed from the society they are charged with governing. They assess the life of their society by a series of typifications that are always some distance from the full reality." - Scott (1998)

Following what happened in December 2010, and the fall of the dictator of Tunisia, the wind carries this **affection** towards the East, where is Egypt. Twitter, and Facebook acted as the freedom platforms, the state is not yet aware of the power of such tool!

Khaled Saeed³ is a young man who was tortured by the Egyptian police till he dies, and the state acknowledged that he had an overdose of drugs and died because of that. But internet is here! Photos have been published and it was clear that Khaled Saeed was beaten till he dies. As it was Mohamed bouazizi's⁴ suicide in Tunisia, that initiated the flame of the Tunisian revolution, Khaled Saeed was the spark of the Egyptian revolution. Millions of people joined "We Are All Khaled Saeed" social media pages, numbers are getting really high, people are calling for an open invitation to go to protest in Tahrir square, "**Occupy it from below**". (Geenen, 2009, P. 347-368)

Everyone is waiting, 25th of January is coming soon, it is the official celebration day of the Egyptian Police Forces. There are calls for demonstrations full of heat and rage coming from Tunisia. All the official Egyptian TV channels are talking about something totally different; nothing has been mentioned at all about these calls for protesting. But who needs that, social media is there, and that was enough!

The Couch political Party⁵ is a term that only Egyptians will relate to. It refers to people who simply lay on their couches, watch news, social media, and following silently, yet not participating at all. This was my positionality on 25th of January. From my **couch**, I was watching the silence of Tahrir Square on the Al-Jazeera news. Tahrir Square on Tuesday at 6 pm was totally empty of people, only police forces everywhere, blocking the **entrances** of the Square! It was a clear message to the state, protesting against the police on their annual police day. This is a **dis/order** confrontation between the state and the nation. No one knows how many people will join. Millions are following the Facebook page of Khaled Saeed, but this is social media, reality is different!

The Tahrir Square at 25th at night, was full of couple of hundreds of protesters, it is dark with yellow lighting from the public lamps in the square. It is silent, only the sound of the protesters holding sings and shouting "**Bread, Freedom, Social Justice**" ... The police did control the situation and the protesters in less than an hour with tear gas, and random police arrest to the people in the Square. By mid-night the Square was fully **occupied from above!**



"Mission Failed"

³ <https://www.bostonreview.net/articles/khaled-said-facebook-egypt-revolution-interview/>

⁴ <https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2020/12/17/remembering-mohamed-bouazizi-his-death-triggered-the-arab>

⁵ [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Couch_Party#:~:text=Couch%20Party%20\(Arabic%3A%20%D8%AD%D8%B2%D8%A8%20%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%83%D9%86%D8%A8%D8%A9,that%20toppled%20President%20Hosni%20Mubarak.](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Couch_Party#:~:text=Couch%20Party%20(Arabic%3A%20%D8%AD%D8%B2%D8%A8%20%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%83%D9%86%D8%A8%D8%A9,that%20toppled%20President%20Hosni%20Mubarak.)

28 JANUARY 2011 "FRIDAY OF ANGER"

Confusion is increasing rapidly, and no one knows what to do. It was evident that the state had taken control of the situation, and the trial of the protesters on the 25th was not enough. Consequently, another call was made on Friday, the 28th. In Egypt, Fridays are perceived as religious events at first glance, but I argue that they primarily serve as social gatherings within a religious context. Fridays in Egypt are weekly **socio-spatial** events. Fridays usually starts slowly, with people meeting after prayers to have a drink, walk, talk, and engage in some shopping.



Therefore, what could be better than having a place where the majority of Egyptians gather? It was the 28th of January, a day known as the "Friday of Anger," and the meeting point were the mosques. No one could question your attendance at Friday prayers. The destination was clear: Tahrir Square. Words had been agreed upon since the 25th of January, "Bread, Freedom, Social Justice," followed by many other expressions on that Friday. I will focus on one particular word: "**peaceful**".

Transitioning from my couch to the streets of Cairo on the 28th of January was not an easy decision. I was an **apolitical** dental medicine student who had never been involved in politics, even from a distance. After engaging in heated conversations with friends on the night of the 27th, where opposing, supporting, and contradicting opinions were voiced, many questions arose. Is Egypt similar to Tunisia? Do you think it's possible? Will there be a large turnout? Is it safe to go there? And many other questions were asked. In the end, it was **Me, Mano, and Heeka** who decided, out of a group of 15 friends, to join the Friday of Anger. As I woke up on that Friday, anxiety overwhelmed me. It was Friday, but not like any other Friday. This time, people weren't going to have tea or a late brunch with each other following the Friday prayers. People were going to create a new **dis/order**. Simultaneously, they were trying to dismantle what had been established over decades of authoritarian state institutions and practices.



On the 28th of January 2011, I woke up and checked my mobile phone. The mobile network was down, and the internet was down as well. It was 9 in the morning. I shaved my beard to avoid suspicion from the police and grabbed my dental lab coat over my shoulders as **camouflage**. I also used it to convince my family that I would be far away from any protests and instead providing medical support, and it would keep me far from the police sight. Looking back now, it's ironic how quickly I discarded my shield, the white dental lab coat. I realized that I was among a crowd of Egyptians of all ages, genders, and social and economic backgrounds. In a single line, we protected each other, our bodies intact, our souls connected. Who needs a coat to protect them when the **bodies** of Egyptians became the true shield?

Leaving my home early in the morning, I headed to the meeting point, Abbasyi Mosque, with the destination being Tahrir Square. The police siren echoed in the background as Egyptians, including myself, poured out of the mosque, chanting in one voice: "Bread, Freedom, Social Justice". The police were strategically positioned at crucial points leading to Tahrir

Square, attempting to prevent the protesters from reaching it. However, every action taken by the state to **immobilize** the situation unintentionally **mobilized** the response. Protesters avoided the early clash with the police by taking different, longer routes to the Square, which ultimately proved to be the most effective way to mobilize the non-participating political masses, including the Couch political party.

Each action taken by the state resulted in an opposite consequence that favored the protesters. People watched from their balconies as the streets filled with people calling "Peaceful." However, this state of peace didn't last long. The government effectively implemented its **spatial strategy**, focusing on specific strategic points where clashes with the protesters occurred. Friday afternoon arrived, and the smell of tear gas permeated the air. The sounds consisted of gunfire, police sirens, shouts, screams, and people running. The police randomly arrested individuals. It was complete **dis/order**.



Heeka, Mano, and I had agreed not to leave each other's side that day—to run together, escape together, and try to leave as we came. Agreeing to this in theory was easy, but in practice, it proved to be much more challenging than we anticipated. That day, after three hours of gathering and forming a massive march that seemed endless, the police positioned themselves on top of one of the bridges, and within five minutes, the sky turned grey. Everyone started running in random directions. I glanced behind me and saw Heeka on the ground, suffering from the effects of the gas. As promised, Mano and I held him and attempted to flee while the police were chasing us. It felt like a scene from a movie—we were slower, but still stronger together.

It wasn't the lab coat that protected me from the police forces; it was the **body** of an elderly woman. That random, short old woman opened the door of her ground floor apartment, shouting for us to come and hide in her home. We all jumped inside, and she closed the door. Even now, it feels like it happened yesterday. My heart races, my face still burns from the gas on my freshly shaved beard. Everyone was in a state of panic. In that moment, I expressed my fear to the old lady, saying, "They (the police) saw us enter your house. They might break in." I was worried about myself, my revolutionary friends, and, of course, the safety of that old lady.

As is often the case, exceptional days don't arise out of nowhere; they are brought about by exceptional individuals. Like Malmström's description of Nur and Fatma's stories, I found myself in one. That day, that old woman told me, "**Don't worry, my beloved. They would have to cross over my body first to reach you.**" Who needs a useless white lab coat for protection when there's such care and affection among all Egyptians? In that moment, I realized that nothing could defeat us. When this stranger woman, with her frail body, displayed the strongest affection, she transformed into a superwoman. Standing behind her door, and all of us behind her.

It was an eventful day that began with the chant of "Bread, Freedom, Social Justice" and transitioned to "**Peaceful.**" By 8 pm, the police institution had collapsed throughout the country, and the path to Tahrir Square was finally free. The military took control, safeguarding vital locations and the protesters. However, we (Me, Mano and Heeka) decided to rest for the night, despite being only 2 km away from the Square. We went to my grandmother's house asking to spend the night there. My grandmother welcomed us as **heroes**, providing us with food, drinks, clothes, and a comfortable place to sleep. Now, we could finally rest. The way to Tahrir Square was secure, and we had made it! Thanks to the power of **mass mobilization**, around it 15 million Egyptians had come together.



2 FEBRUARY 2011 "THE BATTLE OF CAMELS"

Tahrir Square was packed with people; tents were set up, and it was as if the square was being **occupied**. The legitimacy of the movement stemmed solely from the square. All eyes were fixed on it. People were there, refusing to leave; in fact, their numbers were increasing. Egyptians had decided to **un/make** their Tahrir Square, while the state desperately attempted to dismantle it through specific tactics.

On the 1st of February, Hosni Mubarak addressed the nation for the first time with an official speech. He stated, "The events of the last few days require us all as a people and as leadership to choose between **chaos** and **stability** and to establish new circumstances and a new Egyptian reality, which our people and armed forces must wisely work with in the interest of Egypt and its citizens." This was a strategic approach to push people away from the square, to maintain **(order)** and prevent chaos **(disorder)**. Meanwhile, prisons were opened, police were absent, and random people started to looting stores and breaking into houses. So, who was truly creating disorder to dismantle the powerful Tahrir Square?



Although Tahrir Square may have appeared to be a public space, at that time, it was not. It had **entrances** without doors, specific entry points to the square, kitchens, singing stations, charging stations, sleeping tents, field hospitals, and designated areas for prayer, protected by chains of bodies. The square never slept! It was the gateway to freedom of expression, emotions, and rights. So, not everyone needed to be physically present in the square; instead, people could support those in the square by providing them with food, water, and medical supplies. On that particular day, I went with a friend to bring food and drinks from a popular shop that volunteered to support the people in the square. And then, everything came to a halt.

The square was suddenly invaded by people on horses and camels, attempting to attack the protesters and drive them away. This became known as "**the Battle of Camel.**" Horses and camels charged towards the people in Tahrir Square, with undercover police officers riding them, violently targeting the protesters in broad daylight. It turned into a battlefield where the protesters defended the square with their bodies, using stones as their ammunition and street signs as shields. The confrontation lasted for approximately 30 minutes, and the result was a failure for those attacking. The square remained safe. At this point, our food supplies were transformed into medical equipment. Field hospitals were established, and medical support arrived from all directions.



From that moment on, the square underwent a transformation. Security measures were implemented from citizens, and the entrances became more controlled. Local committees were established to screen individuals entering the square. Suddenly, the square became like a fortress, with walls made of bodies rather than stones.

From that moment, the resounding call became "**The Nation's will is to overthrow the regime**" and it remained unchanged ever since. The protesters grew more determined to stay in the square, and many others joined their cause. Tahrir Square became packed. It became evident that the legitimacy of the revolution stemmed from that very place.

Tunisians managed to overthrow their dictator president in just 24 days. In Egypt, on the 11th of February 2011, it was the 18th day of the revolution. The regime was making desperate attempts during those days to hold onto power, employing various maneuvers that ranged from soft to hard power. As we witnessed before with the Battle of Camel and other media campaigns, the streets were filled with insecurity, and nobody knew how it would all end. Nevertheless, people continued to occupy the Square. Mubarak began using different **words** in his speeches to the nation, causing divisions among the people regarding what should happen and whether they should continue or stop.

On that **Friday**, the 11th of February, there were calls everywhere to escalate the protests and move towards the presidential palace without leaving Tahrir Square. The Square would always remain occupied. I joined after the prayer, and marches were coming from various directions. The presidential palace was close to my home, so I was fortunate to be one of the early arrivals. The plan was for people to join both, Tahrir Square and the palace to exert pressure on the state, and Mubarak to step down.

Being part of the team near the presidential palace, while keeping a watchful eye on the Square, felt like a secure and legitimate space for us. By the afternoon, we saw a helicopter leaving the presidential palace. A couple of hours later, breaking news spread—Mubarak was going to deliver a speech to the nation. During one of those beautiful sunsets in Cairo on Friday, some of the protesters called for everyone to be silent. And then, a small radio was turned on...

Mubarak is out!... Everyone started chanting, "**The Nation is done with throwing the regime.**" While heading towards our destination...Tahrir Square.



I had crossed Tahrir Square hundreds of times before in my life, and I knew it well. But since the start of the revolution, it had become my ultimate destination, like any other revolutionary... and here was the moment. I joined millions of people whose destination was also Tahrir Square. After hours, I found myself in the Square for the first time since the start of the revolution. The square was filled with hundreds of thousands of people. The noise was so loud that you couldn't hear each other, people hugged, danced, sang, and chanted together, "The Nation is done with throwing the regime."

Objects possess the longest memories of all; beneath their stillness, they are alive with the terrors they have witnessed (Cole 2015, 22). Following that day, the most famous and central metro station in Tahrir Square was renamed "**Al-Shohadaa**" - The Martyrs, instead of "Mubarak."

At least, this serves as a tangible and living testament to those 18 days in the magical place called Tahrir Square. Regardless of whether the revolution succeeded or achieved its goals, the renaming of the central metro station stands as a true witness to what occurred in this place over those 18 days.⁶

⁶ <https://www.972mag.com/removing-the-mubarak-name-from-public-places/>

RE-MEMBER

Tahrir Square is a phenomenon—a place that embodies the essence of freedom and an extraordinary event that lasted only 18 days. In less than 3 weeks, Egyptians managed to overthrow a ruler who had held power for over 30 years, with plans for his son to succeed him.

Throughout those 18 days, Tahrir Square was a witness to various urban practices. The battle between the revolutionaries and the state for **dis/order** continued until the very end. Starting from the 28th of January, it was the **bodies** of the people that became the heroes, **im/mobilizing** the entire nation to **un/make** the new Tahrir Square and a new Egypt. And finally, the **un/naming** of the Tahrir Square metro station served as a testament to the 18 days of revolution in Tahrir Square.

As Schlunke mentioned, memory is an outcome that arises from the interaction between **materiality** and not solely from human consciousness (Schlunke, 2013). This resonates with me. I was personally **affected** by the revolution; my body was part of the story. My consciousness immediately engaged with the materiality of my memories, intertwining with various texts that awakened my long-forgotten recollections.

My story of Tahrir Square concludes with millions of people chanting, singing, dancing, and celebrating their victory—a day of rebirth. People often ask me why I shifted my career from medical sciences to social sciences?

I believe the answer is clear. It's because of Tahrir Square. Now, I **re-member**.

Al Midan song: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=umIJFvGYYI>



REFERENCES

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PERSONAL REFERENCE



PHOTOS

- All the photos presented here were collected by me during the revolution. I kept them in a folder on my laptop called Egypt. This folder is now 12 years old and unfortunately, I don't have any reference or citation to the photos.