# Culture, Revolutions, and Intelligence Challenges: The "Arab Spring" in Egypt

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The 2011 revolution in Egypt surprised the Israeli intelligence community, as well as many academic researchers and commentators who focused on the stability of Husni Mubarak's regime. Would greater familiarity with popular Egyptian culture in the years prior to the revolution have preempted the surprise, or at least provided a better understanding of its sources and implications? This paper argues that popular Egyptian culture in the years prior to the revolution reflected the start of a profound ideological change among large parts of the Egyptian population, a change that formed the basis of the revolutionaries' motivation and actions. While early identification of this ideological change may not necessarily have prevented the surprise, it would at least have helped the decision makers and intelligence analysts to understand the revolution and think differently about the Egypt of the "day after."

*Keywords*: Egypt, intelligence, culture, popular culture, revolution, Arab Spring

> "*The simple fact is that most Egyptians do not see any way that they can change their country or their lives through political action, be it voting, activism, or going out on the streets to demonstrate.*" (Leyne, 2011)

## Introduction

This paper examines the January 2011 revolution in Egypt as a test case that presents the important role of cultural-social analysis for research, both academic and intelligence-based, and the centrality of understanding the zeitgeist to an informed assessment of processes of political and social change.

The German philosopher Friedrich Hegel argued that every human society is defined by its history and by its cultural and social features—language, perceptions and ideologies, social and economic interactions, and more. The zeitgeist reflects the cultural-historical depth and richness that characterize every human society, and plays an important role in shaping current events and defining the framework for sociopolitical discourse, while providing the consensus for perceptions of the past (Hegel, 1837).

A central claim in this paper is that change in the object of political research derives to a large extent from profound trends in a society and its culture. Inspired by the well-known book by Clifford Geertz *The Interpretation of Cultures*, we consider the field of culture as the set of ideas,

symbols, and concepts that provide researchers with an intuitive understanding of social codes, in-depth trends, and emerging features. Cultural products (books, plays, articles, movies, shows, jokes) reflect popular consensus and truths and expose deeper trends in public discourse, opening a window to the shared social and national codes and symbols anchored in the history, language, religion, and memory of the modern state. Thorough familiarity with cultural symbols enables researchers to understand the spirit of the time and the broader context of ideological and social change (Geertz, 1990).

**Quality analysis based on deep familiarity with the language and culture of the object of research is a prerequisite for any academic or intelligence-oriented research.**

Conversely, analysis of a historical event with no understanding of the zeitgeist and the socio-cultural context, or an attempt to "step into the shoes" of the object of study without understanding its language and the cultural and historical baggage with which it interacts, is destined to fail. Our argument is that quality analysis based on deep familiarity with the language and culture of the object of research is a prerequisite for any academic or intelligence-oriented research.

In this paper we focus on the culture of "the other side," while examining the ideological changes and conceptual developments in modern Egyptian society in the Mubarak period. This perspective links to extensive discussions in political science of the Middle East regarding the relevant level of analysis that can provide an optimal understanding of the inherent complexity of processes of social and political change and continuity. Our contention is that while it is very important to understand the regional or global systemic and structural context (system level) of Egypt during the period under discussion (Brun & Feuer, 2021), or to focus on the state players (state level) (Guzansky & Rakov, 2021), these are insufficient for a complex description of change in analytical terms.

The approach presented here is the constructivist approach (Wendt, 1999), whereby the main factors that explain the political and public dimensions of a situation are the ideas that underlie profound social and cultural processes, such as those that can be identified in Egyptian culture in the years prior to the revolution. As such, this paper can figure in a broader context of the inter-disciplinary dialogue underway in recent decades regarding the need for security and academic organizations to be deeply familiar with the contemporary cultural and ideological discourse of the objects of their research (Clark 2012), as a basic condition for understanding processes of change and continuity.

In particular, this paper addresses the call for cultural intelligence in the field of strategic intelligence, which covers the assessment of the stability and policies of regimes. Emphasis is on intelligence that "deals with the collection of information, and study of population groups with the aim of understanding their array of beliefs, values, and behavioral codes, and the structure of social power, decision making processes, and the patterns of using power in these groups. Cultural intelligence adds the dimension of depth to political and military intelligence and permits the creation of a more complex and relevant picture of civilian populations" (Michael, 2017, p. 85). Inter alia, cultural intelligence can help researchers and decision makers acquire a better understanding of local politics or the foreign policies of a country, including its social codes. For that reason, proponents of the cultural intelligence approach call for deeper knowledge of the culture, language, and history of the objects of study, and for avoidance as far as possible of "othering" by using Western concepts and perceptions as their basis, for example, on the subject of democracy or human rights (Michael & Dostri, 2017).

## The Intelligence Challenge in an Age of Emergence and Upheaval

In his book on intelligence research, Brig. Gen. (ret.) Itai Brun, head of the Research Division of the Military Intelligence Directorate (Aman) at the time of the Arab Spring, stated that intelligence is "the institution for clarifying reality outside the lines" (Brun, 2021). This definition assumes the existence of a reality, and the responsibility imposed on the various intelligence bodies to expose, interpret, and assess its significance in order to optimize the process of making political and military decisions. The "intelligence truth" is necessarily relative and guided by the basic assumptions, perceptions, and attitudes of the researchers. There will always be a gap between the actual reality and the reality as it is perceived, but the process of producing intelligence insights requires researchers to adopt a methodology that limits subjective bias in order to formulate as objective an assessment as possible.

One of the main questions that intelligence researchers grapple with is how to avoid perceptual distortions that impede their achieving a correct understanding of the situation and could lead to mistaken assessments. Their basic assumptions and perceptions (political, cultural, religious, and so on) unconsciously define their starting point and assessments on a variety of questions and intelligence problems that they encounter. How, therefore, can researchers contain the structural biases in their personalities and thinking as they seek to analyze a reality that operates according to entirely different rules and logic?

In his book, Brun states that researchers sometimes have difficulty recognizing changes occurring in a rival system, because it does not fit in with their research perceptions. They are used to examining events in a structured way, as the result of a clear definition of the rival's purpose (intentions) and based on building a specific power (abilities) to implement this purpose. In an emerging system, where the dynamic is not the result of an orderly process and is unpredictable, there is a structural gap in the researchers' ability to understand changes underway in a rival system.

In this framework, the "challenge of emergence" is the central challenge in an age of regional flux, requiring adoption of a methodology that can deal with a developing and sometimes even chaotic dynamic in the rival's system, which is not based on any previous planning. The intelligence challenge of understanding events or processes in a rival country requires thorough familiarity with the background of events and their dynamic, and the responsibility of researchers is not to warn of any future moves but of possibilities that could develop as the result of emerging trends—in our context, particularly if the Israeli side has the ability to influence events (Brun, 2021).

Aman is the central institution of the Israeli security establishment, and has national responsibility for creating knowledge and formulating assessments for the senior political echelons, through professional analysis based on facts and data. This is a serious responsibility, since the price of any error could damage national security interests and cost lives. In recent years, a number of models were developed by former senior Aman personnel attempting to address the need to assess the probability of regime stability, as well as the potential for changes in these regimes. Studies following the upheaval in the Arab world reflected the basic surprise felt by researchers at the subversion of the Arab regimes, and the need to develop a suitable methodology to analyze the dynamic of change. The main criticism directed at intelligence services in Israel and in the world concerns their inability to assess the force of dramatic events and to give decision makers concrete recommendations at the time of the actual events (Eiran, 2013).

The reasons for the failure of the intelligence bodies range from the impossible challenge of collecting and analyzing such a huge amount of data, including public information from social media; to the failure to prioritize sociocultural

research while the decision makers are focused on the operational aspects of using force rather than on the "soft" aspects of public research and cultural discourse; to the tension between the function of intelligence for assessing long term sociopolitical trends ("mysteries") and the concrete need for an ongoing response to the mainly operational world of "secrets"; to the lack of synchronicity between the various intelligence and assessment organizations.

**The ability to identify a unique event such as a revolution in time is complex, to say the least, in view of the objective difficulty of evaluating the dynamic and change in a system with multiple actors and interests.**

In this context, Brun proposed a systemic model that he believes provides a framework for open research discussion. The methodology focused on three central contexts: the countries and organizations (public, local elites, army and security mechanisms, and so on); the area and the zeitgeist (regional dynamic, political reciprocity, social links, and so on); and the international system and its impact on the local systems. He claims there are two main failures in the studies of the stability of leaders: "a failure of imagination" of the researcher, and "clinging to conceptions," which prevent a critical examination and presentation of events marking a systemic change. These failures bring into question the researcher's ability to properly analyze the complexity of a subversive dynamic that leads to systemic change (Brun, 2021).

The assessment model of Amos Yadlin and Avner Golov is intended to answer the question of whether the probability of government stability in a country is low, medium, or high, and which countries are more likely candidates for instability. The model presents four parameters that were identified by the writers as influencing the development of unrest and revolutions in the Middle East: the internal arena, the international arena, the economic arena, and factors that hinder regime change. The model, based on the "expert choice" methodology, is intended to assist researchers in the process of assessing regime stability by means of a thorough analysis of the various parameters, with their qualitative and quantitative components. Unlike other models, the model's outputs are presented in numerical form (Yadlin & Golov, 2013). Itai Brun and Antony Cordesman showed the highly problematic aspects of relying on models to establish an assessment of the stability of leaders and regimes, which derive largely from the complexity of the issue—multiple actors that shape and influence at any given moment, plus the objective difficulty of answering the numerous questions raised by the use of a generic and empirical model (Brun, 2021; Cordesman, 2018).

The contention here is that engagement in issues of stability requires intellectual modesty, because there are no clear answers to questions dealing with prediction and future assessment, particularly when there is a process of emergence, and its dynamic has a causal significance. In addition, an understanding of the language, the culture, the historical context, and the complexity of the public and intellectual discourse and its cultural expressions is a basic condition for the ability of intelligence researchers to grasp and conceive of change that challenges their research concepts. To paraphrase former US Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld (DoD, 2012), the way to limit the extent of things that we don't know that we don't know ("unknown unknowns") is with a deep knowledge of the cultural nuances of the opposing system and identification of the public, intellectual, and popular discourse so that it is not only possible to reflect them but also to draw practical insights for the strategists at the relevant time.

## Popular Culture as the Arena of Ideological Change

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in view of the objective difficulty of evaluating the dynamic and change in a system with multiple actors and interests. It is also doubtful whether accepted methods of academic and intelligence research can provide any help. Many researchers are required to understand unique situations such as revolutions using conceptual frameworks that do not allow them to identify all the components of the new reality, let alone understand it. They look for pieces of objective reality that taken together can reveal the whole picture. Yet usually the reality studied changes faster than the research can adapt its conceptual frameworks or methodology to develop an updated and more relevant conceptual framework for the new reality.

Content experts with access to in-depth information about the object of their research (such as intelligence researchers and Middle East scholars) have proved no better at forecasting events than the "average person" (Lanir & Kahneman, 2006). Is the reason for this failure deterministic? Will it always be linked to the human inability to grasp change in real time? As we understand it, the reply is negative, as Zvi Lanir showed when he presented his model of "systemic design," which is intended to bridge the gap between reality and the perception of reality. A central component of bridging this gap is linked to the ability of researchers to intuitively understand the zeitgeist as a condition for understanding change and its logic.

In this framework there is a greater chance of the materialization of a "black swan" due to the appearance of an event that is outside the range of scenarios (unknown unknowns), mainly for issues requiring thorough knowledge of in-depth long-term processes in the object of research. To paraphrase historian Fernand Braudel: what are "events" other than the foam on waves swept over the depths of history? Research focusing on the dynamic and contemporary events in order to form a picture with no understanding of the zeitgeist's impact on the various layers leads to a superficial and incorrect understanding of long-term strategic trends, and to a focus on the chaff rather than the wheat—on the foam of the waves rather than the deep historical waves. The test case of the January 2011 revolution is a good illustration of this claim (Moon, 2008).

## The Zeitgeist and the Embedding of the Paradigm of Immunity: Cairo 2010

An authentic and fascinating expression of the power of public criticism in Egypt of the Mubarak regime appeared in a column by the well-known Egyptian writer Alaa al-Aswani in the newspaper *al-Shorouk* in July 2010 (six months before the revolution), in which he described an imaginary conversation in a restaurant between himself and Gamal Mubarak (the President's son and heir apparent). The "conversation" is an opportunity for al-Aswani to deliver his piercing criticism of the regime and the President, with the focus on the basic problems of corruption and serious breaches of human rights. The column was published in the context of the elections to the Egyptian parliament in 2010 (al-Aswani, 2010):

- The situation in Egypt is very difficult. We've reached the bottom.
- True, we have huge problems, but that's the price we have to pay for growth.
- What growth?
- In recent years the government has achieved extraordinary rates of growth.
- With all due respect, what growth are you talking about, when half the Egyptian people are below the poverty line? Don't you know about the number of young people killing themselves because of poverty and unemployment?
- We have detailed studies of all these problems in the policy committee.
- Mr. Gamal, most of the things you hear from those around you in

> the policy committee are untrue, and derive from opportunism and personal motives. They are pushing you to the inheritance for their own interests.
> – What do you mean by "inheritance"?
> – That you will inherit the government from President Mubarak.
> – Don't I have the right to engage in politics like any citizen? If I stand for election as president and I win, will you call that an inheritance?
> – You know very well that the elections in Egypt are rigged. Will you be proud of being appointed president using oppression and forgery?
> – Elections all over the world are never free of improper conduct.
> – Mr. Gamal, are we living in the same country? There's a difference between improper conduct and the organized forgery that happens in Egypt. And as for oppression, you can go on the internet and read tragic stories of false arrest, torture, and oppression to which citizens are exposed every day…Have you heard about Khaled Said who was killed by the regime in Alexandria?

Would a reading of al-Aswani's column in *al-Shorouk* have helped researchers identify in time the intention of the masses to take to the streets in January 2011? Would a familiarity with all shades of Egyptian culture have improved our ability to deal with the uncertainty embodied in instability in countries like Egypt? We believe that a thorough understanding of the research object's culture can help researchers gain a better understanding of change processes retrospectively or as they happen, but not necessarily in advance. Cultural research helps to analyze the significance of change with respect to the researcher's areas of interest, whether purely academic questions or whether questions intended to serve national processes of assessment and decision making.

The rapid collapse of stable authoritarian regimes in the Middle East surprised most of the experts from academia and intelligence and security agencies, in view of their shared assessment of such regimes' immunity in the face of public protests. In the Egyptian context, the assessment was linked on the one hand to the unrestrained force of the security mechanisms used by the government against the public, and on the other hand to the widely held but mistaken assessment of the public's reluctance to take to the streets and break the "glass ceiling" due to the absence of a realistic alternative, the widespread oppression, and the price of opposition (Podeh, 2011b).

The prevalence of the historical and sociocultural images of Egyptian society is explained by Eyal Sagi Bizawi, a researcher of Egyptian cinema at the Van Leer Institute:

> A commonly held perception in Israel and worldwide is that the Arab people meekly accept their bitter fate. This perception contributed to the confusion felt by various experts after the determined and stubborn action by the crowd to bring down the Egyptian government. Even in Egypt itself this tendency was apparently identified as a characteristic of the Egyptian people. Many Egyptians said of themselves, "We keep close to the wall," as an expression of their self-effacement vis-à-vis the government, to avoid problems. (Bizawi, 2011)

Skepticism regarding a possible speedy disappearance of the Mubarak regime continued even when demonstrations broke out in Algeria and Tunisia. The quotation cited at the opening of this paper is not unusual. For example, a White House spokesman during the Obama administration admitted at a press conference that nobody foresaw the events in the Middle

East: "Did anyone in the world know in advance that a fruit vendor in Tunisia was going to set himself on fire and spark a revolution? No" (Ambinder, 2011).

Most researchers in the academy and research institutes who studied the question of Egypt's stability did not deal with the challenges to its stability, but rather with a diagnosis of the reasons for its surprising stability over dozens of years (Gause, 2011). An expression of the broad research consensus can be found, for example, with the well-known scholar Fouad Ajami, who stated that Egyptians had become "the observers of their own fate" (Ajami, 2011).

Moreover, an examination of various statements by the former heads of the security and political establishments shows open reference to the intelligence community's failure to predict the revolution. For example, the online news site *Ynet* quoted the former head of Aman and Chief of Staff Lt. Gen. (ret.) Amnon Lipkin-Shahak, who claimed, "We did know that there were severe problems in Egypt, but it was still hard to ask the intelligence service to foresee such extreme developments," and the former head of the Research Division Maj. Gen. (ret.) Yaakov Amidror, who said that "there is no chance in the world that they could have spotted this uprising, which even Mubarak himself did not foresee" (Ephraim, 2011).

The approach in Israel to the consequences of the revolution in Tunisia for the Arab world and for Egypt was cautious and generally restrained. Elie Podeh, in an article in *Haaretz* under the title "Don't Underestimate Tunisia," wrote that while the events in Tunisia were not expected to have an immediate effect, they could have an impact "in the medium to long term," including on the understanding of the leaders of Arab states whose regimes are limited by time and therefore do not enjoy public legitimacy (Podeh, 2011a).

The "new media" (social media, such as Facebook, Twitter and so on, and the rise of inter-Arab media such as *al-Jazeera*, *al-Arabiya*, and others) have served the citizens of Arab countries in their grappling with oppressive regimes. Similarly, in an article analyzing the implications of the revolution in Tunisia for the Arab world (January 18, 2011), Shlomo Brom, former head of the Strategic Planning Division of the General Staff, claimed that most Arab regimes are able to deal with widespread protests. In Mubarak's Egypt there were effective security mechanisms and a broad elite, including the army, with their own interest in the continuation of the existing situation (Brom, 2011).

Accordingly, there was apparently awareness among the Israeli intelligence community, and thus also among its decision makers, of the political and socioeconomic distress in Egypt that led to the revolution. Information about the frustration, anger, and rage of the Egyptian public over their situation, as well as their willingness to protest against the regime, challenge it, and demand its removal, abounded and figured in press reports and academic analyses of Egypt over the previous decade. In other words, at least in appearance, intelligence researchers in Israel saw the "signs" necessary for recognition of the fact that the circumstances in Egypt certainly represented a threat to the stability of the Mubarak regime, in view of changes taking place in Egyptian society.

## The Rising Power of the Public and the Paradigm of Stability

Many questions surrounding the nature of the events remain to this day. With the perspective of a decade, can the events of the Arab Spring be defined as a revolution that fundamentally changed the political order and reshaped the relationship between the citizen and the government, or would it be more correct to define them as a "revolutionary moment" that shocked the authoritarian system, but from a historical perspective mainly served to reinforce it? Is the Middle East still going through a transitional period from the old order that has collapsed to a new order that has not yet crystallized? In the case of Egypt, the argument

is between those who claim that the Egyptian regime displayed resistance and flexibility, and managed to preserve its political hegemony even after the fall of Mubarak's government, and those who see the era of stable Middle East leaders as coming to an end, in view of the features of the period and the demolition of the barrier of fear among a population that are now able to envisage a change in their lives (Brun, 2018).

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The surprise at the rising power of the public and its ability to initiate political processes led to a renewed examination of the basic assumptions and theories regarding the stability of the authoritarian regimes and the dynamic between the public and its leaders. The events of January 2011 in Egypt should not have surprised the experts in view of the severe basic problems (poverty, high unemployment, government corruption, wide oppression of citizens, youth unemployment, and more) and the growing domestic criticism of Mubarak's regime (Beck, 2014).

Moreover, the elections to the parliament in 2010 were stormy and full of emotion due to the widespread understanding that the purpose of the elections was to pave the way for Gamal Mubarak to become leader by taking control of the political arena. The condition for success was to restrain the opposition that could challenge the move, headed by members of the Muslim Brotherhood, who were significantly successful in the 2005 elections. The regime was ready to stop at nothing to ensure that the ruling party won the majority of seats, and that the Muslim Brotherhood would not win even a single seat. The violent atmosphere, the corruption, the severe breaches of human rights, and the understanding that the regime was preparing to ensure its continuity after Husni Mubarak aroused wide antagonism among opinion makers, intellectuals, and opposition politicians (Aly, 2012).

However, the stability paradigm, based on an overestimation of the strength of regime support, denied the possibility of a correct assessment of the events of 2011 and their implications (Ajami, 2010). In addition, in a country that for decades had served as a kind of insurance policy for internal stability and political pragmatism, the events of those years shocked the researchers by the intensity of the change, and raised fears, many of them unfounded, that Egypt could make strategic decisions about changing its political orientation, and even adopt a hostile orientation toward the West and Israel (Medzini, 2011). Thus due to a lack of understanding of the nature of events in those years, researchers had difficulty estimating the probability of change, not only internal change but also in the character of Egypt's foreign and security policy, as well as in other countries of the region (Milshtein, 2013).

## The Egyptian Culture: The January 2011 Revolution

The revolution in Egypt came after two decades of profound ideological change, reflected in how the country was presented in popular culture and the mass media. Egyptian literature (both popular and elitist), popular songs, movies, TV shows, and newspaper articles—all these were the arenas where neo-liberal ideas took shape and created new content that reflected the fundamental social changes underway in Egypt. These cultural arenas, separately and as a whole, expressed a growing feeling that the old ways in which Egyptians thought about themselves and their society had lost their validity and new conventions were beginning to take hold, including ideas about the status of the individual, as a person with growing self-awareness and greater self-esteem, more self-reliant, and more willing to challenge the existing order.

There is a broad empirical and theoretical basis for the claim that popular culture can serve as a platform for ideological change (Bartels, 2013). Different cultural arenas can reflect but also influence the public's social and political attitudes, by setting agendas, providing new information, framing, and transforming (Krosnick & Kinder, 1990; Tversky & Kahneman, 1980). Although in Egypt both President Abd el-Nasser and President Sadat saw popular culture as tools for socialization and indoctrination, popular culture never ceased to be an expression of different, more critical, and even subversive voices as well. In the revolution itself it is possible to find echoes of ideas that were present in Egyptian popular culture many years previously, from criticism of the regime, through the desire for a more pluralist public space, to the widespread demand for a better standard of living (Aviad & Zitsman, 2016).

An examination of trends of continuity and change in Egyptian popular culture shows that the early 1990s were a turning point; thereafter it is possible to identify a gradual and consistent move toward content that harmonizes with the ideological foundation of the revolution. This content shows a break with the past, but also recognition that it is possible to aim for a better future. In turn, the content presents not only a preferable future but also the actions necessary in order to realize it. As soon as the Egyptians were able to imagine a world without the Mubarak regime, it became more likely that they would take action to achieve it (Hassan et al., 2016).

Since the early 1990s, and as opposed to prior years, Egyptian literature has been very critical of the regime and the cruel suppression of human rights in the country. In books such as *In an Air Bubble* (1996), *Honor* (1997), *The Pharaoh* (2000), and *Forbidden Dreams* (2000), there is a recurrent theme of the chaotic and illogical nature of Egyptian reality, where citizens have no control over their lives and future. The citizens are "shrunken" and vulnerable in the face of government abuse and its penetration into all parts of their lives. The regime is presented as uninhibited, violent, and corrupt, only concerned with the interests of the ruling elite while trampling over the ordinary citizens. The reader has a sense of a loss of honor and the deep gap between the "little man's" dreams and ambitions, and the difficult reality over which he has no control (Hafez, 2010).

As with literature, movies made in the last decades of the Mubarak regime also delivered strong criticism of events in Egypt and raised awareness of the crisis and the need for change. Thus, in the years prior to the revolution, filmmakers moved from making light entertainment to movies dealing with the general public's worries and aspirations for the future of the country, and the relationship between the regime and the citizens. The movie *Terrorism and Kebab* (1992) describes a situation in which a group of angry citizens take over government buildings. It was considered one of the first movies to openly show public revolt against the regime, and it describes clashes between the army and citizens. Similarly, the movie *Traffic Light* (1995) follows the conversation developing between a group of foreigners of various types in one of Cairo's teeming streets, as a means of exposing audiences to the many sicknesses of Egypt. Viewers can interpret the traffic jam as a metaphor for the country's stagnation under Mubarak. The movie ends on an optimistic note, signaling to viewers the possibility of a better future, where citizens can shape and change the situation. About a decade later, the 2007 movie *This is Chaos* marks another important point in Egyptian cinema. It presents the regime as corrupt and despicable, isolated from Egyptian society and lacking any responsibility or national pride. In the final scene, demonstrators break into a police station and free numerous detainees who were unjustly arrested. A few years later, reality imitated art when similar cases of demonstrators breaking into police stations and releasing prisoners were recorded during the revolution (Said Mostafa, 2018).

In other words, an examination of popular culture in general and Egyptian cinema in particular in the years prior to the revolution reveals the distress of the "ordinary citizen," the fierce criticism aimed at the regime, and the changes occurring in Egyptian society, including public readiness to take to the streets and demonstrate against the regime, in order to change their lives.

At the same time, an analysis of the cultural and intellectual discourse preceding the events of January 2011 illustrates the lively discussions between the liberal camp, which called for political, economic, and social improvements with promotion of civil rights and equality, and the camp of political Islam, which sought to redefine the social contract between the state and the citizens, and to base the political system on Islamic principles. Some of the demonstrators looked toward Western capitals, not Tehran or Beirut. They wanted a moderate, pragmatic government, and not a hawkish, revolutionary one. As they saw it, the Tahrir Square events were not intended to return Egypt to the revolutionary days of Abd el-Nasser, but to take it forward to global and local normality. On the other side, for adherents of the Muslim Brotherhood and the Salafi faction, the ideal was the model of an Islamic state, run and governed according to the laws of Islam, and they hoped to promote this aim after the fall of the Mubarak regime, while blocking cultural and other heretical ideas from the West. In January 2011, Tahrir Square was the shared space in which these opposing perceptions and ideas came together and united in a historic moment in time to bring down the Mubarak regime.

Social media were the founding, driving and organizing element of the revolution, with its various voices and camps. The ability of social media (Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter) to bring underground and critical ideas and themes to the center of public discourse, and to motivate large sections of the public to demonstrate in the streets of Egypt, was of practical assistance in the organization of protests, but also helped to spread the ideas of the revolution in the local and international arenas, and to establish the legitimacy of the hoped-for political change. Much has been written about the role of social media in motivating the public and their impact on the dynamics of the Arab Spring protests in the Middle East (Alqudsi-Ghabra, 2012). Our central claim is that the instigators of the revolution took the cultural and ideological content, the symbols of protest and "the language of resistance" that had taken root in Egyptian society over the years, and echoed them. Social media did not consist of "new voices" challenging the regime, but rather amplified the ideas, perceptions, and expressions of protest that were present for many years in the political, ideological, and cultural discourse, locating them in the new context of the January 2011 revolution.

However, after the fall of the Mubarak regime and the election of President Mohamed Morsi in June 2012, the sharp divide between the political and ideological camps resurfaced, as well as the divide between the Muslim Brotherhood and the military security system. This was reflected in the mass protests led by the Tamarud ("revolt") movement with the support of the army and the political establishment exactly one year later. On July 3, 2013, the security forces and the army took over the presidential palace, under the cover of huge demonstrations against the Muslim Brotherhood regime, and deposed President Morsi. Once again the army took charge of the centers of political power and worked to shatter the Muslim Brotherhood movement and restore authoritarian order. The surprise experienced by the security and academic research and assessment bodies in January 2011 was repeated in July 2013, and was once again due to an underestimation of the depth of public, establishment, and military opposition to Muslim Brotherhood rule.

## Conclusion

Only rarely is it possible to observe and predict in detail how things will

> turn out, or to describe the precise circumstances of the way in which things will happen. Generally, intelligence can at most point to trends, the direction of historic events, the characteristics of the situation, and the apparent "logic of the historic development." (Harkabi, 2015, p. 145)

This paper focuses on the "perfect storm" that occurred in January 2011 and derived from a profound normative change in Egypt over the decades of Mubarak rule. The change was fed by the link between severe fundamental problems, the policy of oppression and harsh damage to human rights, the deteriorating economic situation, and the realization that President Mubarak intended to bequeath the government to his son. All this joined profound change in the way the public consumed information from social media, which became accessible to every citizen and broke the regime's monopoly over knowledge and perceptions of the situation. During the January 2011 revolution, these new tools also became platforms for organizing and managing protests below the radar of the security mechanisms.

The Egyptian government, as well as outside observers of Egypt, were trapped in the mistaken perception that the social protest lacked organization, energy, and a real ability to challenge the regime's stability, and that the relative freedom of expression in the media and popular culture would not crack its absolute control of all aspects of daily life in Egypt. In the worst scenario, the government relied on the loyalty of the army and security services to suppress any protest and maintain stability, similar to what happened in the bread riots of January 1977. Academic researchers and researchers of Western intelligence and security organizations were able to describe the fundamental problems and the complexity of the challenges faced by Egypt, but they were captives of the regime's assumptions about its own stability, and they lacked a thorough understanding of the changing trends that were infiltrating the culture of popular protest before the revolution. The stability paradigm was so deeply rooted in research perceptions that it failed to identify the change, even as it was underway.

**Popular culture played a central role in forming and introducing awareness of change in the public arena, reinforcing the sense of political, economic, and social crisis, deriving from the ethical-moral failure of the regime, and indicating how it was possible to shape a different future.**

Popular culture played a central role in forming and introducing awareness of change in the public arena, reinforcing the sense of political, economic, and social crisis, deriving from the ethical-moral failure of the regime, and indicating how it was possible to shape a different future. This was not a case of ideological and artistic theory isolated from reality, but of a practical concept in which change was perceived as essential in view of the harsh alternatives (Bamyeh, 2011).

The Mubarak regime did not see the critical discourse in literature, the cinema, and the media as a concrete danger to its stability, rather, even as an outlet that served its stability to some extent—a pressure valve to relieve tension and a way of improving its image at home and abroad. However, Tahrir Square drew in a variety of political, intellectual, and social groups. A new discourse developed in this space, which relied on a shared set of symbols and codes that were shaped in the culture of popular protest, and based on the common denominator of opposition to the existing order and a vision of a new political order. The emergence of this space surprised the regime with its intensity and perseverance, and therefore also surprised researchers from the academy and the security systems.

Israel's military intelligence system is dubbed "the national assessor," and in this capacity its

role is to help the political echelons formulate a national security concept by internalizing the challenges and the opportunities for Israel embodied by the regional and international system. The regional upheaval surprised the intelligence system not only because the events happened so quickly and sometimes apparently with no strategy or purpose, but also because of the inherent difficulty of grasping a historical change when it happens before one's eyes ("failure of imagination"), and because of the deep gap in the understanding of the culture, language, and broad historical context that build and shape a historical event.

The Intelligence corps has made considerable technological and perceptual-methodological advances over the past decade in the fields of collecting, processing, and researching intelligence: developing models to assess stability, optimize research methods, and use technological tools to analyze public sentiment; developing advanced algorithms to analyze big data, which interfaces with organizational BI systems to produce analytical results; and developing artificial intelligence technologies (Even & Siman-Tov, 2020). There has also been a leap forward in regular research work (processing and use of big data, improved access to raw data for researchers, verification and identification of fraud, identification of patterns, templates and anomalies, reduction of human bias, improved continuity of intelligence work, and more) and in the formation of new intelligence professions in the world of collection and research (such as data mining, online analytical processing, and data analysis). These moves help researchers deal with the intelligence potential embodied in the age of information explosion, facilitate access to a wide range of processed and translated intelligence material, and increase productivity in many areas.

However, quality research based on thorough and long familiarity with the language and culture of the opposing system is still, in our opinion, the basic condition for making optimum use of technological tools and systems, if only to meet the basic need to pose the right questions at the junctions of data collection, research, and assessment, and to limit the space for the unknown unknowns, which could lead to more surprises. Researchers who are unable to read the object of their study in its own language and lack familiarity with the various layers of its daily life (media; modern expressions of popular culture such as Facebook, TikTok, Instagram, Twitter, Spoken-Word; various expressions of high culture—literature, poetry, cinema, theater) and a historic perspective, will have difficulty dealing with another upheaval or undermining of stability, in spite of their technological advances with translation tools, and utilization and processing of information. We do not claim that cultural research will enable researchers to predict if and when revolutions will occur. The challenge is that the emerging dynamic that leads to revolutions, such as that of January 2011, is almost impossible to predict in advance, and it will continue to challenge academic and security researchers. However, thorough familiarity based on quality knowledge of the culture and language will help to identify the ideological and cultural foundation on which protest is built, and to indicate the contexts that will help researchers understand the complexity of events in real time. This methodology will reinforce the ability of intelligence researchers to present a number of possible scenarios to the decision makers, incorporating feedback from data flowing from concealed and open sources of intelligence in the process of composing the whole picture.

Our claim raises questions about the ability of Aman researchers, who sometimes lack good tools in their regular work and the required perspective (in view of the short periods spent in intelligence research and the relative youth of the researchers) for dealing with the intensity and complexity of the challenge. This challenge highlights the need to incorporate civilian sources of knowledge (from academia and research institutes) into cultural research as a

built-in feature of studies of regime stability, to provide the required depth and historical perspective.

In conclusion, researchers who read al-Aswani's op-ed in *al-Shorouk* may not have been able to foresee the events of January 2011. And yet it is likely that they had a slightly better understanding than others of the nature of the events once they exploded and began to spread, and would have been slightly more concerned about the future.

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