



**Tunisia and Syria: Social Media for Unification
and Accountability**

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"Tunisia and Syria: Social Media for Unification and Accountability"

On December 17th, 2010, in the small Tunisian town of Sidi Bouzid, Mohamed Bouazizi doused himself with gasoline and lit the spark that would ignite the Arab world. For twenty-four years, president Ben Ali had robbed Tunisia's citizens, like Bouazizi, of personal dignity and denied them the possibility of economic opportunity and social equality. A shrewd network of unemployed college graduates quickly broadcast Bouazizi's self-immolation through Facebook and other social Internet websites.^[i] Within days, as protests erupted, Tunisian dissidents leveraged new media to form a resilient opposition movement united with common goals. A month after Bouazizi's desperate act, Ben Ali and his family fled Tunisia. ^[ii]

As protests raged in Tunisia, citizens in Syria watched carefully. They, too, suffered from brutal and humiliating repression from a dictator of their own, Bashar al-Assad. In March, when a group of children was arrested and brutally tortured, Syria exploded. To reduce international scrutiny, Syrian president Bashar al-Assad prohibited international media presence. The attempt was unsuccessful. Using social networking sites and satellite phones, activists delivered a deluge of photographs, videos, and other evidence exposing Syrian brutality.^[iii] Unlike Ali in Tunisia, Assad responded with sophisticated virtual countermeasures, undermining the safety of the Internet for organization and collaboration. Today, Syria remains in turmoil, with fragmented opposition groups unable to reconcile their differences through virtual dialog. In both countries, digital platforms shaped the political narrative, but their differing outcomes reveal the importance of united protesters working in synergy with international accountability.

With the Middle East's best-educated populace,^[iv] largest middle class, and impressive annual GDP growth, Tunisia was considered an economic and social success in the Arab world.^[v] Beneath this public façade, however, Tunisia was plagued with widespread economic despair, bleak prospects, and unemployment. As ordinary citizens struggled economically, Ali's family contemptuously flaunted politically derived wealth.^[vi] Further, the state-run media indulged in blatant displays of political double-speak, praising Ali's leadership even as citizens were tortured at any sign of disobedience.^[vii] It is no wonder, then, that much of the Tunisian population publically tolerated but privately hated Ben Ali's leadership. When Bouazizi's friends and family shared his tragic demise through Facebook, the cost of pretending to accept Ben Ali became too great, and villagers took to the streets. Emboldened by their fellow citizens' courage, thousands of Tunisians soon followed.^[viii]

Bouazizi was not the first to protest through fire. Just eight months earlier, Abdessiem Trimech, another street vendor humiliated by bureaucratic hostility, set himself ablaze.^[ix] Unlike Bouazizi, no cell phone camera captured his passing, and Trimech became just another victim of Ali's degrading rule. Without Facebook and

mobile phones, Bouazizi's plight would never have amassed, energized, and mobilized thousands of Tunisians to protest Ben Ali's dictatorship.

Thanks to the Internet, individual opposition members quickly coalesced into a unified, legitimate movement. Using Facebook, Twitter, and blogs, activists cultivated common symbols, related successful stories, and developed strategies to rid Tunisia of Ali's tyranny. This virtual opposition community became a cohesive, leaderless network. With no identifiable leaders to detain or torture, Ali was paralyzed, unable to respond to the resilience of an organization both everywhere and nowhere. When Ali recognized the power of social media and blocked social networks, it was too late. Activists switched to SMS to carry on their collaboration.[\[x\]](#) By the time Ben Ali fled to Saudi Arabia, the opposition movement was a formidable force of the public will.

Tunisia's unity and resilience would prove instrumental to securing meaningful political reform and stability. After Ali's departure, when Tunisia's Prime Minister assumed command of the country, protesters returned to the streets, demanding genuine political reform and accusing him of being part of the old regime.[\[xi\]](#) By late January, 40,000 to 100,000 Tunisian citizens engaged in civil protests.[\[xii\]](#) Within a month, Ghannouchi bowed to popular demand and ceded power to a coalition government.[\[xiii\]](#) Today, Tunisia's opposition culture continues to guide political discourse after Tunisia's democratic elections.[\[xiv\]](#)

To the east, Syrian dissidents watched Tunisia in admiration. On March 15th, a group of 200 young protesters gathered in Damascus, demanding democracy and an apology for Syrian brutality.[\[xv\]](#) Assad responded swiftly, marshaling security forces to crush the protests.[\[xvi\]](#) As protests continued unabated, forces steadily escalated a violent crackdown, killing at least 5,400 and arresting over 60,000 people.[\[xvii\]](#)[\[xviii\]](#) When Assad ordered snipers, tanks, and military force to quell protests, citizen journalists documented Assad's lethal force through social networks. These stories, images, and videos are the only objective sources of information about Syria available to the outside world.

Since 2007, Syrian authorities had blocked access to popular networking websites such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube.[\[xix\]](#) anticipating the organizational capacity of social media. Fearing instability near its border, Iran delivered sophisticated Internet surveillance equipment for Assad to monitor and suppress protests.[\[xx\]](#) Shortly afterward, Assad removed restrictions on social networking sites.[\[xxi\]](#) Today, Syria's "open" virtual networking platforms allow the Syrian government to track down dissidents, disrupt protests, and promote its own agendas on the Internet.[\[xxii\]](#) In a country plagued by sectarian and ethnic tensions, Assad's regime manipulates perceptions (on the ground and on the Internet) to aggravate discord among would-be co-conspirators.[\[xxiii\]](#) This divide-and-conquer strategy deflates online collaboration and fragments the opposition movement.[\[xxiv\]](#)

The conflicts in Tunisia and Syria remind us that new media are tools that can be used effectively or poorly, or foiled through other means. Social media do not galvanize people alone; the stories shared through social networks do. Nor can these tools replace physical civil activism. When online activists tried to organize a “day of rage” for Syria a month before protests began, few citizens participated and the effort fell flat. [xxv] The dissident sentiment would only garner widespread participation when the story of a group of youth's torture circulated through social networks.[xxvi]

New media can shape a conflict environment for two mutually dependent aims. First, social media tools like YouTube and cell phones reveal the topography of the political landscape. By replacing or augmenting nonpartisan foreign media presence, social media inform international intervention. Second, social networks offer new ways for citizens to connect with one another, forming a virtual opposition community with common grievances, beliefs, and objectives. This network is unified, open, and leaderless.

In Syria, the tools of modern digital communication helped display conflict to international and domestic actors and allowed them to exert their influence. In 1982, Hafiz al-Assad (Bashar's father) decimated an entire residential district to stamp out a Muslim Brotherhood insurgency, killing 10,000 to 40,000 people.[xxvii] Without the Internet's watchful eyes, Hafiz al-Assad succeeded in hiding this atrocity for eight days.[xxviii] By contrast, when Bashar al-Assad ordered security forces to crack down on the city of Dara'a in 2010, activists immediately disseminated video clips across the globe. Despite efforts to eliminate international scrutiny, Assad watched as the United States and Europe issued economic sanctions while Turkey and Qatar—countries close to Syria—distanced themselves from Assad.[xxix]

International accountability can only lead to change when a viable governing alternative exists. In Syria, Assad remains defiant of international criticism. With support from Iran, which actively endorses Assad's lethal crackdown on protests,[xxx] and Russia, which continues to trade with and support Assad internationally,[xxxi] Assad defies international sanctions by redistributing trade to his allies. Without a unified opposition coalition, many governments are reluctant to intervene, fearing a destabilizing power vacuum if Assad falls.[xxxii]

This leads to the second vital aspect of modern communication platforms. Tunisian dissidents used social media to forge a united, consistent opposition community to achieve lasting political reform. This opposition culture gave Tunisian protesters a valuable measure of legitimacy in the eyes of the international community. Social Internet platforms connected dissidents and then sustained international interest and investment in the Tunisian narrative. In contrast, Syria is unable to leverage social collaboration platforms to unify protesters. Assad's countermoves in the cyber-realm reveal the susceptibility of the Internet community as an organizational tool.

New media may seem liberating because governments, who have relied on the threat of force, have been taken by surprise. As governments adapt, and the use of new media becomes more symmetric, new media may ultimately prove dangerous for protesters. Assad's virtual counterblows in Syria show that new media can be used to organize, but these tools can also be monitored more cheaply and effectively than other forms of organizational communication. More so than the use of new media to share evidence, new media as coordination tools are vulnerable to governmental influence.

The influence of digital media is constrained when authoritarian regimes respond symmetrically to peace-seekers. To tip the balance back to citizens, policymakers must address the significance and vulnerability of using social media as organizational tools. Advocating tools, such as web proxies and server relays, to achieve online anonymity will reduce the effectiveness of governmental influence. By advocating more general networking platforms over those that are designed specifically for political dissent, third parties gain valuable credibility and make it harder for governments to censor, divert, or manipulate them.[\[xxxiii\]](#) Social media matter most when activists—or governments—use these tools more effectively than their opponents.

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