

Middle East and North Africa 2011

Background note for the AIUSA High School Essay on MENA

A new fearlessness, a new language of peaceful protest, a new calendar dotted with "Days of Rage" and a new Facebook and Twitter generation of young women and men activists has emerged in virtually every country in the Middle East and North Africa, changing the human rights landscape of the region.

Amnesty International - State of Human Rights, Middle East and North Africa (MENA), January to mid April 2011

Amnesty International USA invites High School students to answer the following question:

What is the significance of the popular uprisings for the Middle East North Africa region and for the international human rights community? What is the role of young people and social media in mounting this challenge to so many established governments? And how should an organization like Amnesty International respond to this largely unforeseen development?

The below information was compiled to give youth greater understanding about the MENA region (geography, the 2011 uprisings and the role of youth and social media). Please feel free to use this document as a resource for your essay. It was originally created for the MENA Youth Dialogue project.

For more information about the essay visit:

<http://www.amnestyusa.org/about-us/grants-and-awards/high-school-essay-competition>

Deadline: December 16, 2011

YOUNG PEOPLE - THE MENA REGION POPULATION

Youth between the ages of 15-24 constitute the largest age group within the predominantly Arab countries of the Middle East and North Africa, representing more than one third of the total population¹. The region has some of the highest unemployment rates in the world: Egypt's youth-unemployment rate is currently about 25% and Tunisia's is 30%². Young people have become a significant force in the public uprisings that have spread across the Middle East and North Africa in recent months including in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Bahrain, Yemen, Iraq, Syria and even Saudi Arabia, demanding change, human rights and claiming a role in shaping the future of their countries.

HOW IT STARTED

TUNISIA

This people's movement for change began in Tunisia, sparked by the action of a **26-year-old graduate**, Mohamed Bouazizi who set himself on fire on 17 December 2010 in front of a government building in the town of Sidi Bouzid. His desperate, ultimately fatal act reflected his frustration and despair at not being able to find work and the police confiscation of his fruit cart for selling without a permit, taking away his only source of income. His act shook the community. People took to the streets to voice their outrage at living in poverty while their government, led for 23 year by President Ben Ali, seemed not to care. The protests quickly spread. The authorities' resort to violence to contain the protests only intensified the anger and soon the whole country was calling "Ben Ali – Dégage!"

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Demanding jobs and better living conditions, an end to corruption and the right to enjoy freedom of expression, the largely peaceful protests by youth and others were met with severe state violence, but the protestors were not deterred. They felt they had little to lose, swept aside their fears and demanded their rights. Following the uprising in Tunisia, cries for "human dignity" were soon being heard loud and clear in the streets of Egypt.



Protesters demonstrate against Tunisian President Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali in Tunis, Tunisia 14 January 2011; the day the President fled the country. ©REUTERS/Zohra Bensemra

EGYPT

In Egypt, protests started on 25 January and while widespread focused especially on Cairo's main Tahrir (Liberation) Square. People demanded an end to President Hosni Mubarak's 30-year-rule and demonstrated against poverty, unemployment, repression, police abuse and corruption. **Young activists, with or without political affiliation mobilized networks through Facebook and Twitter.** For years, unrest had been bubbling under the surface. The 30-year national state of emergency³ and the Emergency Law gave security forces powers that had led to ongoing serious human rights abuse, and the people wanted change.

Protests grew, the Egyptian security forces responded with violence and blockades and the authorities **shut down the internet and mobile phone networks**, but that did not stop people. As *baltaguias* ("thugs") – some of them believed to be hired by members of the ruling party,

rampaged through the streets looting, people **organized to protect their neighborhoods.**



Nothing could hold back the protesters, who seemed to be **fighting for their very lives: against poverty, joblessness, fear and abuse.** On 1 February, the "March of a Million" attracted at least 2 million people in Cairo. Mubarak stepped down on 11 February and **the world celebrated with Egyptians.**

Egypt protests: Tahrir Square, Cairo, Egypt, 8 February 2011.

© Omar Robert Hamilton

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However, Egypt's "25 January Revolution" is far from over – reform has not been completed and protests and repression continues. Despite the many challenges ahead, the uprising signaled the new face of the nation – an **optimistic young Egypt** demanding that their human rights are respected.

'We came from a generation, like more than a third of all Egyptians, for whom Hosni Mubarak as President was a natural, permanent state of affairs – as engrained in our psyche as the national anthem we had to sing in school every morning. His fall as a result of a popular uprising was something many dared to dream of but never quite believed. We are used to our leaders either dying of natural causes, being overthrown in palace coups or being assassinated.'

From a blog by the Amnesty International team in Cairo on 14 February.⁴

THE UPRISINGS SPREAD

News reports started to recognize the trend: "Large numbers of **unemployed graduates**⁵, frustration with **lack of freedoms**, the excesses of the ruling class and anger at police brutality seem to have come together to spark an **unstoppable wave of public anger**"⁶ The Guardian in the UK reported that in Egypt, young people "are tired of the paternalism that decides everything for them and tells them what to think"⁷. Al Jazeera reported: 'In an unprecedented show of civil disobedience and open revolt, **young Egyptians have clearly and forcibly delivered a message that is still resonating in the Middle East and North Africa: Authoritarian rule in the region is over.**'⁸

Anti-governmental protests spread across the Middle Eastern and North African region including in Libya, Yemen, Bahrain, Iraq, and Syria displaying similar socio-economic and political discontent. Young people in Egypt and Tunisia inspired youth populations in other Middle Eastern and North African countries to stand up for their rights and demand change for their futures despite the violent reactions of the authorities. Below are some examples of youth roles in these protests.

YEMEN

Protests calling for reform have taken place throughout Yemen during 2011, fuelled by frustration at corruption, unemployment and repression. **Students and other young activists have been at the forefront** and set up a protest camp in a square near Sana'a University, dubbed al-Taghyeer (Change) Square. They were partly inspired by protests in Egypt and adapted their chants. Reporting on a demonstration in February 2011, *The New York Times* wrote: "**The people want to expel Ali Saleh!**" students shouted, adapting a chant commonly heard during the demonstrations in Egypt"⁹.

The protests in Yemen have been brutally repressed; scores of protesters have been killed and hundreds injured after security forces have repeatedly used live ammunition to break up demonstrations. An apparently co-ordinated attack on the protest camp on 18 March left around 52 people dead and hundreds injured. An earlier attack on the camp on 12 March reportedly led to the deaths of three protesters. **A student who was there told Amnesty International:** "On Friday night we started suspecting security forces were preparing to take action against us after they increased their presence in the area. **We started chanting 'It's peaceful, it's peaceful', but later they attacked us while we were praying.**"

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MAP OF THE MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA

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LIBYA

Libyans began protesting in January, emboldened by events in neighboring Tunisia and following the arrests of human rights activists campaigning against past abuses in the city of Benghazi. Authorities responded with violence, **removed Al Jazeera from the TV network and blocked social media sites**. Protests spread and anti-al-Gaddafi forces seized control of many towns. Even the capital Tripoli saw protests both for and against Mu'ammar al-Gaddafi. Government forces began a fierce counter-attack, closing down independent reporting of what was spiraling into an armed conflict, shutting down access to the Internet and phone services.

Allegations of crimes against humanity led the UN Security Council to refer the situation to Prosecutor of the International Criminal Court and to call for civilians to be protected. The international community became involved and conflict has raged on between forces loyal to al-Gaddafi, the anti-al-Gaddafi forces and the NATO-led international forces attacking from the air. Attacks by Libyan forces have hit or targeted civilians and abandoned weapons and landmines litter the country. **Children have been picking up munitions**, unaware of the dangers. Hundreds of thousands of people have fled, mostly into Egypt and Tunisia.

SYRIA

Although Syrian authorities severely restrict the rights to freedom of expression and association small groups inspired by protests elsewhere in the region organized peaceful gatherings via means including **Facebook and Twitter** in February.

Protests spread in March after the authorities used excessive force on a largely peaceful demonstration in the city of Dera'a calling for the release of children detained for writing "the people want the downfall of the regime" on a wall.¹⁰



By 8 June, over 1,000 protesters and others had been killed. In May a **25-year-old university student** told Al of the beatings and **torture** he and others suffered while held in a sports stadium after he was seized by security forces.¹¹ Al obtained video footage that pointed to a "shoot to kill" policy being used by the Syrian security forces to quell reform protests.¹²

Syria Unrest 2011 © Private

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ALGERIA

This young country – **half the country's 35 million people are aged under 25** – faces similar political and economic problems as its neighbors. Though not on the scale of those of their fellow North Africans, there have been protests for reforms around **youth unemployment**, poor housing, corruption, and rising food prices.

Although President Abdelaziz Bouteflika lifted the 19-year-old state of emergency and promised reforms, the security forces have cracked down on demonstrations in Algiers, including one organized by **young activists using Facebook**. University **students continue defying security forces by demonstrating** in the streets of Algiers.

MOROCCO

Young people have been active using social networking sites to organize. Activists mobilized thousands of people onto the streets in cities across the country to demand reform to the constitution, "real democracy" and an end to corruption. Security forces used unjustified force to break up some protests. Morocco's King responded to protests by promising reform. However the security forces continue to use excessive force to disperse protests and a 30-year-old protester is believed to have died in June as a result of beating by the security forces.

BAHRAIN

On 14 February 2011 thousands of people gathered from across Bahrain for a peaceful "Day of Rage" walk in the capital Manama to demand greater freedom and social justice. The day had been **organized on Facebook and Twitter**.

Peaceful protest turned to panic when security forces used violence. Young people at the forefront came under fire: Sayed al-Wadaei, a **24-year-old unemployed graduate** was unarmed yet attacked and hospitalized by police forces and 'Ali 'Abdulhadi Mushaima', **aged 21**, was shot at a demonstration in al-Daih village, east of Manama, on 14 February, and died soon after in hospital. With many protestors demanding far-reaching political changes, the King of Bahrain introduced Martial Law on 15 March and authorized Saudi Arabian troops to enter Bahrain.

The day after, Bahraini security forces crushed the protests. This led to more bloodshed with the death of more protestors and some police. Since then at least 500 people, including women, have been detained, mostly incommunicado. Many have reportedly been tortured or otherwise ill-treated. Scores of people have been brought to trial before military courts whose proceedings are unfair.

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Some have been convicted, two have been sentenced to death. A **young poet, Ayat al-Qurmuzi, 20**, was sentenced to a year in prison for reading out a poem critical of Bahrain's King at a pro-reform rally. She has reportedly been tortured while in detention. Nearly 2000 people have been dismissed from their jobs because of their participation in the protests.

Anti-government protest outside Bahrain's state television building 4 March. © Gregg Carlstrom/Al Jazeera

SAUDI ARABIA

Even from the secretive and virtually closed society of Saudi Arabia, where any form of protest is banned, reports emerged of protests in early 2011 calling for reform and an end to corruption. In an almost unprecedented move, a rally was held after Friday prayer on 4 March in the capital, Riyadh. A video posted on YouTube showed a man carrying a banner saying "**Youth of 4 March**".

The man, Muhammad al-Wad'ani, **a 25-year-old teacher**, was arrested during this protest. On 2 March, a video of him calling for protests in support of the fall of the monarchy was posted on YouTube. He remained held incommunicado at the time of writing. Protesters were also arrested following demonstrations in the Eastern Province in March; among those **detained were children**.

IRAN

The streets of Tehran and many other Iranian cities were filled with protesters on 14 February for the first time since the brutal repression of the vast demonstrations held in protest at the disputed June 2009 presidential election results.

This time, opposition leaders called for demonstrations in solidarity with the uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt. Scores, if not hundreds, of demonstrators, including three students, Ramtin Meghdadi, Saeed Sakakian and Sirous Zarezadeh, were arrested on 14 February during demonstrations and have joined other fellow students in Iranian jails, such as Majid Tavakoli.¹³

THE ROLE OF NEW MEDIA

Throughout these events digital and on-line tools have been important for young people to express their thoughts and opinions, talk to each other, and make their demands for change. This use of new media for youth activism has been growing in Egypt: 'A nationwide strike in April 2008 was a defining moment for the protest movement, especially for the group that quickly emerged – the "6 April Youth Movement" – which demonstrated the potency of Internet

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activism and mobilization through Facebook in the face of repression.' Asmaa Mahfouz, a young woman and founding member of the 6 April Youth Movement posted a video as part of a viral online initiative urging people to join the protests in the streets.¹⁴

On-line activities have enabled young people to organize and mobilize themselves as a collective force for the public protests within their country. For example, "Egypt's internet activists have played a key role in the pro-democracy protests from the outset...online campaigning is evolving to suit their real-life activism in Tahrir Square."¹⁵



Digital activism had a significant role with the protests across Egypt. The "We are all Khaled Said" campaign for justice for a young Egyptian man who died after being beaten by security forces became a rallying cry for opponents to repression.

Egypt uprising, 28 January 2011
© Sarah Carr

The "We are all Khaled Said" Facebook group had hundreds of thousands of followers and played a key role in organizing and putting out calls for the 25 January 2011 protests. Further impetus for the protest movement came on 7 February, when Wael Ghoneim, a Google executive and an administrator of the "We are all Khaled Said" Facebook account, made an emotional speech on television following his release from secret detention¹⁶

For many Egyptians, the internet became a way to express outrage over the extent of torture in their country.

In addition to the violent attacks and physical repression suffered by protestors, attempts have also been made to repress the use of the Internet, denying the right to freedom of expression. Prior to the protests in January 2011, the Egyptian authorities had cracked down on other opposition groups, including members of the 6 April Movement. Begun as an online network on Facebook in 2008 to support striking workers in the town of El-Mahalla El-Kubra, it has since grown into a large youth movement which played a leading role in the uprising and which calls for an end to the state of emergency and greater respect for human rights. Others targeted include members of the Egyptian Movement for Change (Kefaya) whose members, like those of the 6 April Movement, have continued to stage protests for political reform and the termination of the state of emergency.¹⁷

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THE WAY FORWARD

Youth across the Middle East and North African region continue striving for change to the current political, socio-economic and human rights problems in their countries and these public uprisings have shown that youth are having a direct impact on shaping their future of their countries.

"It is small groups of individuals, young people coming together, raising their voices who can ignite big change...they have put a scare to unsavory governments across the world that if they continue to violate human rights they will be in trouble!"

Salil Shetty, Secretary General, Amnesty International



Bahrain: International pressure needed to halt spiraling Human Rights crisis © Amnesty International

Young people, in particular young women, have been excluded from civic and political participation and have lacked employment opportunities¹⁸: "Nine out of ten jobless in Egypt are under age 30, with women disproportionately unemployed."¹⁹ They are demanding reform with access to full civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights, the guarantee of a level playing field for political participation and freedom of expression: "Youth placed blame for lack of participation on the present cultural and political environment in Egypt, undermined by the country's absence of democratic practices and by a security apparatus that was intolerant of any form of dissent."²⁰ Reform processes must involve

women: "For the promise of true and lasting human rights change in Egypt and elsewhere in the region – and the world – to be fulfilled, women of diverse backgrounds and views must be at the table as full partners."²¹

Amnesty International continues to monitor the constantly-evolving situations across the region. The organization is urging all state authorities in the region to respect human rights, including the rights of those now demanding change. Amnesty International is also demanding justice for the unlawful deaths and injuries caused by the security services when cracking down on the protests.

**TAKE ACTION FOR HUMAN RIGHTS IN MENA NOW WITH AI:
sign the web action for Women demanding an equal voice in the new Egypt:**

<http://www.amnesty.org/en/50/campaigns/mena>

This background note should only be used as a reference and introduction to the role of young people in the MENA crisis. The majority of the information in this document is taken from the Amnesty International Report 2011: State of Human Rights in the Middle East and North Africa, January to mid-April 2011. This background note should not be used as a full overview of the events in the MENA region. For more information please refer to AI reports:

<http://amnesty.org/en/middle-east-crisis>

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Endnotes

¹ UNDP

² The Economist

³ A State of Emergency is when a government gives itself special powers in order to try to control an unusually difficult or dangerous situation for example civil unrest or natural disaster

⁴ <http://livewire.amnesty.org/2011/02/14/the-new-face-of-egypt/>

⁵ See also AI's report about when peaceful protests by workers and unemployed youths were met with excessive use of force by security forces: 'Behind Tunisia's 'Economic miracle' inequality and criminalization of protest': <http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/info/MDE30/003/2009>

⁶ <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-12157599>

⁷ <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2011/mar/06/tunisia-protests-egypt-democracy>

⁸ <http://english.aljazeera.net/indepth/features/2011/01/2011129081571546.html>

⁹ <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/02/15/world/middleeast/15yemen.html> (New York Times)

¹⁰ See Amnesty International, "Syria death toll climbs as protests spread" (Index: PRE 01/159/2011), 25 March 2011.

¹¹ <http://www.amnesty.org/en/news-and-updates/syrian-student-tells-torture-ordeal-mass-stadium-detention-2011-05-24>

¹² <http://www.amnesty.org/en/news-and-updates/syria-video-points-%E2%80%99shoot-kill%E2%80%99-policy-security-forces-2011-05-26>

¹³ <http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/asset/MDE13/019/2011/en/80cf8807-ffbd-4072-8584-6fc54a301d73/mde130192011en.pdf>

¹⁴ See Page 16 and 23 'Egypt rises: Killings, detentions and torture in the '25 January Revolution': <http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/info/MDE12/027/2011/en>

¹⁵ <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-12381295>

¹⁶ See Page 15 and 22: 'Egypt rises: Killings, detentions and torture in the '25 January Revolution': <http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/info/MDE12/023/2010/en>. See also Page 45: Emad Al Kabir, was raped by two police officers who filmed the torture on a mobile phone and spread the video to further humiliate him. They received three year-prison sentences after the video was posted on the Internet and outraged Egyptians

¹⁷ Amnesty International, Egypt: "*Shouting slogans into the wind*": human rights concerns ahead of the parliamentary elections (Index: MDE 12/032/2010), 21 November 2010: <http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/asset/MDE12/032/2010/en/8addea19-dbd8-4fce-b1dc-857557b55d13/mde120322010en.pdf>

¹⁸ Please note AI is not working on youth unemployment

¹⁹ <http://www.carnegieendowment.org/publications/?fa=42160>

²⁰ <http://www.thedailynewsegypt.com/letters/what-after-egypts-youth-revolution.html>

²¹ <http://livewire.amnesty.org/2011/03/08/egyptian-revolution-sidelining-women/>