

A photograph of a street protest in Cairo, Egypt. In the foreground, two people are crouching low to the ground, one wearing a black hoodie and the other a grey jacket. In the background, there are metal barricades with red and white striped signs that say "CAIRO TRAFFIC". A large plume of white tear gas is being released from the right side of the frame. A white IVECO truck is partially visible on the right. The scene is set against a dark, multi-story building.

Heinz Duthel

# The Social Networks Revolution...

A world after Wikileaks

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Anonymous

The Tor anonymity network

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Imagining a new Egypt.

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The Social Networks Revolution...

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- \* December 28, 2010: protests in Algeria start
- \* January 13-16, 2011: protests in Libya over housing
- \* January 14, 2011: protests in Jordan start
- \* January 17, 2011: protests in Mauritania and Oman
- \* January 18, 2011: major street protests in Yemen start
- \* January 21, 2011: self-immolation protest in Saudi Arabia
- \* January 25, 2011: major street protests in Egypt start

How a Single Match Can Ignite a Revolution

Thousands of Jordanians protest economic conditions

Several thousand Jordanians protested on Friday over soaring food prices and the erosion of living conditions, blaming corruption spawned by free-market reforms for the plight of the country's poor.

Islamists, left wing and trade unions activists marched through the old downtown of the city chanting "The government is eating our flesh ... O Samir (Prime Minister Samir al-Rifai), you have slaughtered us with high prices. You have left us broke."

The 5,000-strong march was largest so far after several smaller protests last week, inspired by Tunisia, to try to force authorities to roll back austerity steps such as higher taxes imposed to repair public finances that have been severely strained by the global financial crisis.

Hundreds of members of Jordan's Muslim Brotherhood, the country's largest opposition group, chanted: "O people of Jordan revolt against poverty and hunger," "The government must leave" and "No to theft of the country."

Many Jordanians hold successive governments responsible for a prolonged recession and rising public debt that hit a record \$15 billion (9 billion pounds) this year in one of the Arab world's smaller economies that is heavily dependent on foreign aid.

"Successive governments have sought to compensate for the rising debt caused by corruption from the pockets of people," Abdul Hadi Falahat, head of the powerful opposition dominated professional unions told crowds in the event.

"These policies have led to the impoverishment of Jordanians and widespread corruption and the squandering of public funds," said Falahat, whose 130,000 members belong to 14 professional unions, including doctors and engineers.

Rifai, under fire from an enraged public over high food prices, announced wage increases on Thursday to civil

servants and the military in an apparent attempt to calm the protests.

Rifai also pledged no new taxes this year to cushion ordinary Jordanians from the rising cost of living -- a burden on the already cash strapped budget, whose deficit is expected to reach \$1.4 billion (875.6 million pounds) this year.

The government already allocates hundreds of millions of dinars to various subsidies, from food to water and electricity, as a safety net against rising global food and energy costs in a country almost entirely dependent on imports.

And just days after the unrest in Tunis and Algeria over soaring prices and unemployment, Jordan hastily announced a \$225 million (140 million pounds) package of cuts in the prices of several fuels and staple products, including sugar and rice sold in government run outlets.

In another policy reversal, the government promised to open jobs in some state sectors to ease unemployment after an earlier freeze on hiring to cut waste within a bloated public sector, where salaries eat up the bulk of an \$8.8 billion (5.5 billion pounds) budget.

"We want solutions that go to the root of problems not piecemeal measures. The outcome of unbridled free market reforms and privatisation has been poverty and widening disparity in wealth and deepening frustrations," said Amjad Majali, a deputy from the southern city of Karak, who attended the march.

Oman protestors call for fight against corruption

Around 200 Omanis took to the streets on Monday to demonstrate against corruption and high food prices, it has been reported.

Despite protests and trade unions being largely prohibited in the Gulf, police did not intervene in the protest, said the newswire AFP.

Protesters chanted slogans calling for an end to corruption and carried banners saying "Rising prices have destroyed the dreams of ordinary citizens".

The crowd, which gathered outside the housing ministry, were reported to have been calling for higher wages and fixed costs for basic food items, which have dramatically risen amid the global downturn.

The Omani demonstration comes days after a revolt in Tunisia which toppled the 23-year presidency of Zine Al Abidine Bin Ali.

Security forces in Sudan arrested the opposition leader and head of the Popular Congress Party Hassan Al Turabi for fomenting unrest just hours he warned of a Tunisia-style popular revolt.

Sudan opposition leader arrested

Prior to Turabi's arrest, his deputy Abdullah Hassan Ahmed said that nine other party members were arrested and he vowed that the party would take to the streets to change the government, which he accused of rigging general elections last year, stoking inflation and curbing civil liberties.

And during a press conference after the arrest of the party leader, Mr. Ahmad called the government's accusations against his boss unfounded saying that Turabi was arrested not for cooperating with the rebel movements in Darfur, but because of his appeals for change in the political system of the country.

Turabi was once a close ally of Sudanese President Omar al-Bashir but fell foul of the president in 1999 and set up his own party.

The arrest comes days after a popular revolt in Tunisia forced president Zine El Abedin bin Ali to flee the country. In an interview with Agence France Presse news agency Turabi had warned that given Sudan's economic woes and the looming prospect of independence for the south, a Tunisian style revolt was possible.

The coalition of Sudanese opposition groups has called for a national conference that includes all the major political parties in the country to write a draft new constitution for the new state in the north and to prepare the grounds for fresh elections. The opposition boycotted last year's presidential and parliamentary elections.

Government officials say that the opposition had planned to mobilize the public, carry out assassinations and use violence to achieve political goals, and that no one was detained for his political views or statements.

Al-Turabi has been arrested many times since he quit the ruling party in 1999, the last of which was in 2010 when he was arrested for a month and a half after accusing the Sudanese President of forging the April presidential elections.

#### Thousands in Yemen Protest Against the Government

Yemen, one of the Middle East's most impoverished countries and a haven for Al Qaeda militants, became the latest Arab state to witness mass protests on Thursday, as thousands of Yemenis took to the streets in the capital and other regions to demand a change in government.

The scenes broadcast across the Arab world were reminiscent of demonstrations in Egypt this week and the month of protests that brought down the government in Tunisia. But as they climaxed by midday, the marches appeared to be carefully organized and mostly peaceful, though there were reports of arrests by security forces. Predictably, the protests were most aggressive in the restive south.

In Sana, at least 10,000 protesters led by opposition members and youth activists gathered at Sana University, and around 6,000 more gathered elsewhere, participants, lawmakers and activists reached by telephone said. Many carried pink banners and wore pink headbands.

The color was both a unifying symbol and an indication of the level of planning underlying the protests. Weeks ago, as



the Tunisian protests were still escalating, a committee from an umbrella group of six opposition parties settled on an escalating scale of color to accompany their own plan of action, starting with purple for lawmakers to show their opposition and moving to pink for the street protests. Red, said Shawki al-Qadi, a lawmaker and opposition figure, would be the final color, though he said the opposition had not yet decided what actions would correspond with the move.

While the marches were not marked by violence, the potential for strife in the country is difficult to overstate. It is beset by a rebellion in the north and a struggle for secession in the south. In recent years, the regional Al Qaeda affiliate has turned parts of the country, a rugged, often lawless swath of southwestern Arabian Peninsula, into a refuge beyond the state's reach. Added to the mix is a remarkably high proportion of armed citizens.

"I fear Yemen is going to be ripped apart," said Mohammed Naji Allaw, coordinator of the National Organization for Defending Rights and Freedom, which was one of the organizers of the protests. "The situation in Yemen is a lot more dangerous than in any other Arab country."

He said a phrase often heard these days is that Yemen faces "tatasawmal" — the Somalization of a country that witnessed a civil war in the mid-1990s.

Part of Mr. Allaw's worries sprung from the inability of the opposition to forge a unified message. Some are calling for secession, he said, while others are looking to oust the president, Ali Abdullah Saleh, through popular protests. Yet others, he said, simply wanted Mr. Saleh to undertake a series of reforms before elections in April.

Khaled Alaesi, a colleague of Mr. Allaw's at the human rights group in Sana, said: "The opposition is afraid of what would happen if the regime falls. Afraid of the militant groups, Al Qaeda, the tribes and all the arms here."

The government responded to the protests by sending a large number of security forces into the streets, said Nasser Arabyee, a Yemeni journalist in Sana reached by phone. "Very strict measures, antiriot forces," he called them. But the government suggested it had not deployed large numbers of security forces.

"The Government of the Republic of Yemen strongly respects the democratic right for a peaceful assembly," said Mohammed al-Basha, a spokesman for the Yemeni Embassy in Washington, in a statement. "We are pleased to announce that no major clashes or arrests occurred, and police presence was minimal."

A pro-government rally, in another district of Sana, organized by Mr. Saleh's party, attracted far fewer demonstrators, Mr. Arabyee said.

The demonstrations on Thursday followed several days of smaller protests by students and opposition groups calling for the removal of President Ali Abdallah Saleh, a strongman who has ruled this fractured country for more than 30 years and is a key ally of the United States in the fight against the Yemeni branch of Al Qaeda.

In a televised speech on Sunday night, Mr. Saleh tried to defuse calls for his ouster, denying opposition claims that his son would inherit his power — as has happened in Syria and, some fear, may occur in Egypt. He said he would raise army salaries, a move that appeared designed to ensure soldiers' loyalty. Mr. Saleh has also cut income taxes in half and ordered price controls.

The protests were the latest in a wave of unrest touched off by monthlong demonstrations in Tunisia that led to the ouster of Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali, the authoritarian leader who ruled for 23 years and fled two weeks ago. The new Tunisian government issued an international warrant for his arrest on corruption charges Wednesday.

The antigovernment gatherings in Yemen also followed three days of violent clashes between protesters and

security forces in Egypt, with the country bracing for another round of demonstrations on Friday in defiance of a government ban. Egyptian protesters have called for an end to the 30-year rule of President Hosni Mubarak, who, like Mr. Saleh, has been an ally of the United States.

Unlike Tunisia and Egypt, relatively stable countries with substantial middle classes and broad access to the Internet, Yemen is among the poorest countries in the Middle East.

“People do have fair grievances everywhere in Yemen, but unfortunately they are being used by politicians from both sides,” the deputy finance minister, Jalal Yaqoub, told Reuters on Thursday, adding that the government “should listen to the people and enact substantial reforms.”

Yemen’s fragile stability has been of increasing concern to the United States. Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton, in a visit to Sana earlier this month, urged Mr. Saleh to open a dialogue with the opposition, saying it would help to stabilize the country. His current term expires in two years, but proposed constitutional changes could allow him to hold onto power for longer.

During her visit, Ms. Clinton was asked by a Yemeni lawmaker how the United States could lend support to Mr. Saleh’s authoritarian rule even as his country increasingly becomes a haven for militants.

“We support an inclusive government,” Mrs. Clinton said in response. “We see that Yemen is going through a transition.”

What happened to the nice Tunisia Rumsfeld told us about? Former US ambassador to Tunisia Robert Godec’s ominous warnings in a confidential embassy cable about his nation’s North African ally in 2008 and 2009 have an additional political juiciness when read against the backdrop of unfolding events in the country.

“Tunisia is a police state, with little freedom of expression or association, and serious human rights problems,” Godec said.

And in another extract, "The problem is clear: Tunisia has been ruled by the same president for 22 years. He has no successor. And, while president Ben Ali deserves credit for continuing many of the progressive policies of president Bourguiba, he and his regime have lost touch with the Tunisian people.

"They tolerate no advice or criticism, whether domestic or international. Increasingly, they rely on the police for control and focus on preserving power. And, corruption in the inner circle is growing. Even average Tunisians are now keenly aware of it, and the chorus of complaints is rising. Tunisians intensely dislike, even hate, first lady Leila Trabelsi and her family. In private, regime opponents mock her; even those close to the government express dismay at her reported behaviour.

"Meanwhile, anger is growing at Tunisia's high unemployment and regional inequities. As a consequence, the risks to the regime's long-term stability are increasing." Despite these warnings from the ambassador, it was never intimated that the United States would take any action against the government, not even reducing the lucrative business relationship enjoyed by the two nations.

Choosing its words carefully

Now, as the country bubbles with political fervour after that chain of events that organically emerged from the youth, although choosing its words carefully, the superpower has backed the protesters.

"The people of Tunisia have spoken," said state department official PJ Crowley. Endorsing the movement that toppled Zein El Abidine Ben Ali, Crowley said the US hopes for "a genuine transition to democracy" - of course strongly implying that there never was democracy there in the first place.

It is worth rewinding and noting some choice words that former US secretary of state Colin Powell had to say about the country when he visited in December 2003.

"Our bilateral relationship is very, very strong," said Powell. "We are great admirers of Tunisia and the progress that has been achieved under president Ben Ali's leadership." Just says before his trip, Human Rights Watch had urged Powell in a press release to pressure the country on human rights violations.

And it was only a few months earlier, in February of that year, that he gave his famous presentation to the UN, about the rationale to invade Iraq.

After his stirring performance listing the conclusive proof of Saddam Hussein's weapons of mass destruction, and his unquestionable ties to al-Qaeda, Powell completed the slam dunk by moving towards the conclusion of his speech with this, "My friends, this has been a long and a detailed presentation, and I thank you for your patience. But there is one more subject that I would like to touch on briefly, and it should be a subject of deep and continuing concern to this council: Saddam Hussein's violations of human rights."

'Constructive leadership'

A visit to Tunisia by defence secretary Donald Rumsfeld in February 2006 proves even more revealing:

"We have a very long relationship with Tunisia," Rumsfeld remarked after the meetings.

"Tunisia is a moderate Muslim nation that has been and is today providing very constructive leadership in the world. The struggle that's taking place within that faith is a serious one, an important one. There's a very small number of violent extremists on the one side against a broad, overwhelming majority of people who are moderate."

And with regards those within the government's ruling elite that US officials called "The Family" in one of the WikiLeaks, who it was said are above the law in the country, Rumsfeld had a glowing reference, "They have demonstrated, if one looks at this successful country...the ability to create an environment that's hospitable to investment, to enterprise, and to opportunity for their

people." Hardly sounds like the type of country whose people's economic desperation would lead to self-immolation.

He spoke of a "very constructive military and diplomatic cooperation" between the two nations.

"Both of our countries have been attacked by violent extremists, so we know well the stakes involved in the struggle that's being waged.

"Tunisia has long been an important voice of moderation and tolerance in this region, and has played a key role in confronting extremists not just within this country, but in the area as well."

The Associated Press news agency quoted Rumsfeld as saying Tunisia was a "democracy", but that it was moving "at different paces" on the social, economic and political levels.

All three moving at such a rapid pace now, that the geopolitical trade-offs, where stability trumps democracy, despite preaching the sanctity of the latter and the policy of aligning with the best worst guys around because of the national interest, no matter how they treat their own people whose freedom you claim to champion, may be up for reassessment.

What happened to that nice democratic country that Rumsfeld and Powell told us about?

Protest spreads in the Middle East

The issues in Tunisia, Lebanon, and Egypt differ, but yesterday anger boiled over in all three countries as grievances were brought to the streets. In Tunisia, where protests have already overthrown President Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali, continued demonstrations sought to depose his allies still in their positions. Meanwhile Tunisia's interim government has issued an international arrest warrant for the former president and members of his family. In Lebanon, Sunni supporters of ousted Prime Minister Saad Hariri took to the streets in a "day of rage", burning tires

and blockading roads in Tripoli and Sidon. It was in Egypt where the most dramatic events unfolded as the largest protests in a generation rocked Cairo. Demonstrators, many inspired by events in Tunisia, called for an end to nearly 30 years of rule by President Hosni Mubarak.

Man dies after setting himself on fire in Saudi Arabia

A man has died after setting himself on fire in Saudi Arabia's south-western region of Jizan, officials have said.

Reports in the Saudi media say the man, who was in his 60s, set himself on fire using a petroleum product in the town of Samitah, and died later in hospital.

There have been several acts of self-immolation in the Arab world, mimicking the suicide of a man in Tunisia which provoked the anti-government uprising.

A Mauritanian man who set himself on fire also died in hospital on Saturday.

Yacoub Ould Dahoud, a 43-year-old businessman, was transferred to a clinic in Morocco with 90% burns after his act of self-immolation in protest at Mauritanian government on Monday in the capital, Nouakchott, his family said.

'Only the beginning'

It was the death of a young unemployed man that triggered the protests in Tunisia which led to the overthrow of President Zine al-Abdine Ben Ali last week.

Unable to find a job after college, Muhammad Bouazizi, decided to start selling vegetables on the streets of Sidi Bouzid. But officials confiscated his unlicensed cart, and slapped and insulted him.

On 17 December, the 26-year-old stood the town's main square, doused himself in petrol and set himself on fire. By the time he died of his injuries on 4 January, protests over his treatment had spread throughout Tunisia.

Anti-government protest in Sanaa (22 January 2011)  
Thousands of people took part in a demonstration in the Yemeni capital, Sanaa

There have since been a series of self-immolations in the Arab world.

On Tuesday, a 25-year-old unemployed Egyptian died after setting himself on fire in the port city of Alexandria, while three other people survived setting themselves on fire on the streets of the capital, Cairo.

Some acts of self-immolations have also been reported in Algeria.

The incident in Samitah was the first such incident in Saudi Arabia. Officials said the motive was not yet known, but the Sabq.org website said the dead man was angered by how difficult it was to gain Saudi nationality.

Mr Ben Ali has been in Saudi Arabia since fleeing Tunisia last week.

In neighbouring Yemen, thousands of people took part in a demonstration in the capital, Sanaa, demanding the resignation of President Ali Abdullah Saleh.

"Get out, get out, Ali. Join your friend Ben Ali," the protesters chanted.

One of the organisers, Islamist MP and teachers' union leader Fouad Dahaba, said the rally represented only the beginning and that the "coming days will witness an escalation".

Yemen's government has shown little tolerance for dissent in the past, and the security forces fired tear gas to break up Saturday's protest. About 30 people were also detained, one security official said.

In Algeria, riot police also broke up an opposition demonstration by several hundred people in the capital, Algiers. Activists said more than 40 people were injured; the authorities put the number at 19.

Mohamed Bouazizi spent his whole life on a dusty, narrow street here, in a tiny, three-room house with a concrete patio where his mother hung the laundry and the red chilis to dry. By the time Mr. Bouazizi was 26, his work as a fruit vendor had earned him just enough money to feed his



mother, uncle and five brothers and sisters at home. He dreamed about owning a van.

A road under construction in the town of Sidi Bouzid, Tunisia, about 200 miles south of Tunis. The town is considered poor even by the standards of the nation.

Faida Hamdy, a 45-year-old municipal inspector in Sidi Bouzid, a police officer's daughter, was single, had a "strong personality" and an unblemished record, her supervisor said. She inspected buildings, investigated noise complaints and fined vendors like Mr. Bouazizi, whose itinerant trade may or may not have been legal; no one seems to know.

On the morning of Dec. 17, when other vendors say Ms. Hamdy tried to confiscate Mr. Bouazizi's fruit, and then slapped him in the face for trying to yank back his apples, he became the hero — now the martyred hero — and she became the villain in a remarkable swirl of events in which Tunisians have risen up to topple a 23-year dictatorship and march on, demanding radical change in their government.

The revolution has rippled beyond Tunisia, shaking other authoritarian Arab states, whose frustrated young people are often written off as complacent when faced with stifling bureaucracy and an impenetrable and intimidating security apparatus. That assumption was badly shaken with Mr. Bouazizi's reaction to his slap, and now a picture of him, in a black jacket with a wry smile, has become the revolution's icon.

In a series of interviews, the other fruit vendors, officials and family members described the seemingly routine confrontation that had set off a revolution. They said that Mr. Bouazizi, embarrassed and angry, had wrestled with Ms. Hamdy and was beaten by two of her colleagues, who also took his electronic scale. He walked a few blocks to the municipal building, demanded his property, and was

beaten again, they said. Then he walked to the governor's office, demanded an audience and was refused.

"She humiliated him," said his sister, Samia Bouazizi. "Everyone was watching."

Sometime around noon, in the two-lane street in front of the governor's high gate, the vendor drenched himself in paint thinner then lit himself on fire. A doctor at the hospital where he was treated said the burns covered 90 percent of his body. By the time he died on Jan. 4, protests that started over Mr. Bouazizi's treatment in Sidi Bouzid had spread to cities throughout the country.

On Jan. 14, the president, Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali, fled the country.

People in Sidi Bouzid use the words "impossible" or "miracle" to describe the events of the last month. But they also say that what transpired was much more likely here, in this impoverished, agrarian central Tunisian city, with a history of resistance to colonial rule and nothing to lose.

The country's official unemployment rate is 14 percent, concentrated among young people, but the rate is much higher in Sidi Bouzid, say local union leaders, who put it at higher than 30 percent. Neglected by successive central governments, bereft of factories, seized with corruption and rife with nepotism, Sidi Bouzid and the small towns surrounding it are filled with idle young men, jobless, underemployed or just plain poor.

Some of them pass the time at cafes playing a card game called rami. Others get drunk on the moonshine they buy at cigarette stands and stumble around Sidi Bouzid's town center, near the mosque where Mr. Bouazizi sometimes parked his fruit cart.

The nearest movie theater is 80 miles away.

There are jobs at a toy factory, one of the two biggest plants in town, but they pay only about \$50 a month. People with college degrees head for the more affluent coastal cities or settle for less.

Wassim Lassoued, who has a master's degree in physics, works part time in an Internet cafe. "Five years ago, lots of money was sent here to establish new businesses," he said. "That money disappeared."

Mr. Ben Ali rarely visited Sidi Bouzid, and when he did, local politicians paved roads and arranged for the planting of fully-grown trees to hide their neglect. On the edge of town, there is a gleaming youth center with fenced-off skateboard ramps that appear untouched. Residents said no one uses the center, which is reserved for people with connections.

### How a Single Match Can Ignite a Revolution

That question has echoed across the Arab world and beyond in the weeks since an unemployed Tunisian, Mohamed Bouazizi, doused himself with paint thinner and lit a match on Dec. 17. His desperate act set off street clashes that ultimately toppled the country's autocratic ruler, and inspired nearly a dozen other men to set themselves on fire in Egypt, Algeria and Mauritania.

Those serial self-immolations have provoked horror and wonder, with some Arab commentators hailing the men as heroic martyrs of a new Middle Eastern revolution, even as others denounce them under headlines like "Do Not Burn Your Bodies!"

Yet burning oneself as political protest is not new. Many Americans remember the gruesome images of Thich Quang Duc, a Buddhist monk, burning himself to death in Saigon during the Vietnam War in 1963, his body eerily still and composed amid the flames. Many other monks followed his example as the war intensified. In Europe, Jan Palach, a 20-year-old Czech who burned himself to death in Prague in 1969 a few months after the Soviet invasion of his country, is remembered as a martyr of the struggle against Communism. Less well-known protesters have died in flames in Tibet, India, Turkey and elsewhere. In China,

Buddhists have set themselves alight for at least 1,600 years.

Perhaps what is new about the latest self-immolations is their effectiveness. Mr. Bouazizi, a fruit vendor, set himself on fire in front of the local governor's office after the authorities confiscated his fruit, beat him and refused to return his property. He is now seen as the instigator of a revolution that forced out President Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali after 23 years of authoritarian rule. Mr. Bouazizi's imitators hope to generate similar revolts in other Arab countries, where corruption and stifling autocracy have led to a similarly vast gulf between rulers and the ruled.

In the past, many people recoiled from such protesters as attention-seeking lunatics. Or the authorities were too powerful. Few people today remember Homa Darabi, the Iranian child psychiatrist who set herself on fire in a crowded Tehran square in 1994. A month earlier, a 16-year-old girl had been shot to death for wearing lipstick, and Darabi — who had lived in the United States and refused to wear the veil — had seen enough. "Death to tyranny, long live liberty, long live Iran!" she shouted, as flames engulfed her. Iran's official attitudes toward women's rights have scarcely changed.

One striking feature of the passionate discussion about Mr. Bouazizi and his imitators — at least for Westerners — is the relative absence of religion. Most Americans are used to hearing about Muslim suicide bombers who are impelled in part by the promise of salvation. The recent Arab self-immolators appear to have been motivated more by anger and despair at their social and economic plight.

Even some clerics have kept the debate on a secular level. Yousef al-Qaradawi, for instance, a prominent and influential Egyptian cleric who lives in Qatar and has a TV show on Al Jazeera, spoke sympathetically about Mr. Bouazizi and others who attempted suicide, saying that they were driven to it by social injustice and that the

responsibility for their deaths lay with the rulers of their countries.

“People call these men brave, and mostly they don’t use the word ‘suicide’ in describing them,” said Tarik Tlaty, a Moroccan political analyst. “They don’t use the word ‘martyrs’ either. They call them ‘sacrificers,’ and they speak of an ‘uprising.’ It is not a religious language.”

Others, including many clerics, disagree. Al Azhar, the Cairo university that is the oldest and most prestigious center of learning in the Sunni Muslim world, issued a fatwa last week reaffirming that suicide violates Islam even when it is carried out as a social or political protest.

A similar debate has often taken place among Buddhists over self-immolation. Many Buddhist authorities say suicide cannot be reconciled with their religious tradition. But an ascetic strain among Chinese and Korean Buddhists includes gestures of painful self-sacrifice, from the burning of fingers to self-immolation, said Robert Sharf, chairman of the Center for Buddhist Studies at the University of California, Berkeley. The practice is rooted in the Lotus Sutra, a relatively late Buddhist text that speaks of a magic king who douses himself with fragrant oil and allows his body to be burned as a sacrifice.

“Full-body immolation is rarely done solely as a religious practice,” Dr. Sharf said. “It is more typically a form of political protest at the same time. For instance, it has been used repeatedly in Chinese history to protest anti-Buddhist state policies, such as the mass defrocking of priests.”

In Afghanistan, some women burn themselves to death to escape abusive marriages, a practice that seems to be on the rise recently. Although these deaths are not intended as social protests, they are often seen in the West as implicit critiques of Afghan society.

It is often impossible to be sure what really motivates those who burn themselves to death. There is debate, for instance, about how Thich Quang Duc viewed his self-

immolation in 1963, a protest that was related to the South Vietnamese government's treatment of Buddhist monks and may have been at least partly religious in nature. In other cases, politics may be a cover for personal despair or rage against a loved one.

Whatever the motive, suicide sometimes spreads like a disease, especially when heavily covered in the media. David P. Phillips, a sociologist at the University of California at San Diego, published a 1974 study documenting spikes in the number of suicides after well-publicized cases. He called it "the Werther effect," after the rash of suicides that followed the 1774 publication of "The Sorrows of Young Werther," the novel by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe whose romantic hero kills himself.

"One thing is strongly suggested by the academic studies: People are more likely to copy suicides if they see that they have results, or get wide attention," Dr. Phillips said.

Tunisia has provided grim evidence for that. And Mr. Bouazizi may yet provoke more fiery deaths across the Middle East if the revolution he helped spark is seen as successful.

Public suicide attempt sparks angry riots in central Tunisia  
On Friday, December 17, a young fruit seller in his twenties attempted to set himself on fire in front of the Sidi Bouzid regional council in central Tunisia. Mohamed Bouazizi's act of desperation sparked a wave of revolt in the provincial town, one of the poorest in the country.

Over the weekend, several hundred youths smashed windows, damaged cars and fought with riot police in Sidi Bouzid, about 200 kms south-west of the capital, Tunis. Rioting reportedly resumed late on Monday, with hundreds of youths confronting police who used tear gas to try to disperse them. Some local people say the attempted immolation unleashed pent-up anger about the region's high unemployment rate, slow economic development and rampant corruption.

The Tunisian Web has been abuzz with comments as videos and photos of the riots emerged. This kind of footage - and the very existence of riots - is extremely rare in Tunisia, which for the past 23 years has been ruled with an iron fist by President Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali. State media initially denied the incidents, leaving Tunisians to rely on Twitter or activist blogs for information on the events in Sidi Bouzid.

On December 20, state media finally published an official response from the government, but without showing any footage of the riots. It quoted an official source calling the immolation a "painful" but "isolated" incident, and expressing "outrage at attempts to take it out of its context and exploit it for unhealthy political ends".

"The regime's own children are now turning against it"

Slimane Rouissi lives in Sidi Bouzid. He participated in the protest after Mohamed Bouazizi's immolation attempt.

Mohamed Bouazizi's attempted immolation in front of the regional government headquarters on Friday was the spark that set off the fire. The young man dropped out of school at a very young age (before high school) to help support his family of eight. His uncle had bought a small farm in R'gueb, near Sidi Bouzid, and his whole family moved there to work in the fields. But the farm was one of those shut down due to corrupt land appropriations in the region (see our article on the topic last July). So Mohamed was forced to return to Sidi Bouzid to try to earn a living selling fruit and vegetables in the street.

Street vending is illegal in Tunisia, and city authorities regularly confiscated Mohamed's small wheelbarrow of fruit. But Mohamed had no other option to try to make a living, and he bought his merchandise by getting into debt. It was a vicious circle. On Friday morning, he had contracted 300 dinars (130 euros) in debt for his goods. Police spotted him, confiscated his cart and reportedly mistreated him. Mohamed was desperate, so he went to regional government headquarters to try to plead his case

with the governor. But he was thrown out and nobody would listen to him. It was at that point that the young man bought two bottles of paint solvent, poured them over himself and set himself on fire in front of the building.

Mohamed was immediately rushed to the hospital. He survived, but suffered severe burns on 70% of his body and is still in intensive care.

Clearly, authorities have opted to deal with the situation through repression

This sad incident sparked a wave of anger within the population. Other street vendors dumped their goods in front of the regional government's headquarters in protest, and hundreds of people gathered in front of the building. At one point the protesters tried to storm the building but were held at bay.

The national police chief was dispatched to Sidi Bouzid on Friday evening. The following day a peaceful march was organised in memory of Mohamed, but police shot tear gas to disperse the crowd. That's when things turned violent. Groups of protesters began clashing with policemen; others set up barricades and burned cars. Around 50 people were arrested. Many of those who were later set free say they were tortured by police.

Police reinforcements arrived on Sunday, including over 100 police on motorcycles and police trucks. Clearly, authorities have opted to deal with the situation through repression, instead of sending officials to start a dialogue with us locals.

What most struck me in these riots was the fact that most of those who went out to protest were youths born after 1987 (the year Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali became president). All they have known is the Ben Ali presidency. These are the children of the regime, and they are turning against it."

Al Jazeera

Since its start in 1996, Al Jazeera has become one of the most influential broadcast networks in the Arab world. Its



all-news and public affairs format reportedly reaches 40 million viewers from its base in the tiny Persian Gulf emirate of Qatar. American networks like CNN buy its footage and exclusive video.

Al Jazeera's freewheeling broadcasts have long made it the *bête noire* of Arab governments, and in some earlier instances they have succeeded in reining it in. Western governments see it as shaping a narrative of popular rage against oppressive American-backed Arab governments (and against Israel) ever since its founding. That narrative has long been implicit in the channel's heavy emphasis on Arab suffering and political crisis, its screaming-match talk shows, even its sensational news banners and swelling orchestral accompaniments.

Yet for all its flaws, Al Jazeera still operates with less constraint than almost any other Arab outlet, and remains the most popular channel in the region.

It rose to special prominence in early 2011, when it was widely hailed for helping enable the revolt in Tunisia with its galvanizing early reports, even as Western-aligned political factions in Lebanon and the West Bank attacked and burned the channel's offices and vans this week, accusing it of incitement against them.

Not since the 2003 invasion of Iraq, when American officials accused it of sympathy for Saddam Hussein and the insurgency that arose after his downfall, has Al Jazeera been such a lightning rod. This time, its antagonists as well as its supporters are spread all over the Arab world.

It is accused of tailoring its coverage to support Hezbollah in Lebanon and Hamas in Gaza against their Lebanese and Palestinian rivals. Its reporter in Tunisia became a leading partisan in the uprising there. And critics speculate that the network bowed to the diplomatic interests of the Qatari emir, its patron, by initially playing down the protests in Egypt.

The channel got it start when the new emir of Qatar, Sheik Hamad bin Khalifa al-Thani, eager to put his country on the world stage and separate himself from the region's more traditional leaders, bought a failed BBC Arabic television service and gave the journalists the reins. Al Jazeera, which means “the Peninsula,” referring to the Arabian peninsula, was an instant success. The broadcaster's uncensored independence, unusual in most of the Arab countries where its signal reaches, quickly found an audience— and controversy.

After the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, Al Jazeera aired tapes made by Osama bin Laden and other members of Al Qaeda, becoming the terrorist group’s main link to the outside world. In the aftermath of American or Israeli military actions, it often aired graphic images of violence and civilian casualties. Senior Bush administration officials called on Al Jazeera to tone down its coverage of the Middle East, arguing that its reporting inflamed Arab public opinion against the United States. Its talk shows have also angered Arab governments; many countries have jailed Al Jazeera’s reporters or shut its offices.

The network has expanded to include several Web sites and the television channel, Al Jazeera English, which seeks to compete directly with international news stations like CNN. It appears to have modified its tone, no longer referring to Iraqi insurgents as the “resistance” or to casualties of American troops as “martyrs,” and has similarly softened its stance on the Saudi government, perhaps under pressure from Qatar’s rulers.

Al Jazeera English, which was launched in 2007, is not available on most American cable networks, but can be viewed on YouTube, the online video service.

Peddler's martyrdom launched Tunisia's revolution

It began with a slap and an insult hurled at a vegetable seller in a small town surrounded by scrub and cactus. It