

## Leading Protests in the Digital Age: Youth Activism in Egypt and Syria

By Billur Aslan Özgül

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In the last few years, much research has been done on the role of the Internet and social media in the Arab Spring uprisings. The study titled *Leading Protests in the Digital Age: Youth Activism in Egypt and Syria*, written by Billur Aslan Özgül aims to make a new contribution to this field. The study, which adopts a comparative approach, focuses on the use of information and communication technology in the 2011 protests in Egypt and Syria and asks which communication methods were used to plan, organize, coordinate and sustain peaceful protests in Syria and Egypt through semi-structured interviews with the activists who participated in the uprisings.

Özgül states that Egypt and Syria provide a fruitful ground for comparison, as they represent a wide range of Arab Uprisings, and both have ongoing authoritarian regimes, and increasing technology levels. Following the introduction, Özgül explains the similarities and differences between these two countries in detail and background information that provides a context for a better understanding of the results of her research findings. Özgül searches for the underlying reasons behind the opposition to the regime and the widespread uprisings.

In the third part, Özgül focuses on different kinds of leaders in the protests in Egypt and how these leaders contribute to the organiza-



tion of the movement. The interviews with the participants within the scope of the study show that there are three types of leaders in the uprisings in Egypt: experienced leaders, soft leaders, and hybrid leaders. Experienced leaders correspond to actors who make strategic decisions on the ground using their experience. These leaders, who lead the protests in the offline space, played a key role in reaching out to the poor in Egypt, especially those who have difficulties in accessing ICTs, and encouraging them to participate in the protests. Soft leaders, social network administrators who act as opinion leaders on the Internet and appeal more to the middle class. Hybrid leaders blended the experiences of these groups and worked both in the field and on online platforms. According to Özgül, in the uprisings in Egypt, these three types of leaders acted together to support the revolution.

Peaceful protests in Syria took place for six months, whereas in Egypt the protesters managed to overthrow Mubarak in eighteen days. Chapter four discusses how Egyptian activists mobilized, coordinated, and sustained the protests in these 18 days. The first finding included in this part of the research is that the past protest experiences of the activists contributed to their effective use of ICT. The activists used ICT to ensure the participation of different segments of society in the

protests and to make the movement international. Özgül points out that using ICT is a way of challenging anti-revolutionary forces, but that it is not enough to keep the protests going. These findings show that resource mobilization theory is still valid in today's digitally supported social movements. In other words, sources such as the past experiences of protesters, networks, and the support of non-governmental organizations still play an important role in ensuring the continuity and success of movements (p. 126).

The fifth part of the study deals with the protests in Syria. According to Özgül, as in the Egyptian revolution, the seeds of the uprisings in Syria were sown on the Internet. However, Syrian activists were not as successful as their Egyptian peers in starting and sustaining the movement through ICT. One of the main reasons for this is that Syrian activists, who had stayed away from politics for many years, had a weak repertoire of contention compared to their Egyptian peers. According to Özgül, the Internet was not the main mobilization tool in the Syrian protests; rather, opponents of the regime mainly used for interpersonal communication rather than organizing large masses (p. 163). However, with the strengthening of the repertoire of contention, the use of ICT by activists also improved.

The sixth part of the study asks how the peaceful protests in Syria turned into an armed struggle. Özgül states that there were four main obstacles to the continuity of peaceful protests, the first of which was the lack of unity. In the first month of the protests, while people in many cities went to the squares, the demonstrations did not spread in Damascus and Aleppo. Also, restricted access led to the inability of activists fighting for peaceful demonstrations to attract the attention of the

international press and to represent themselves. According to Özgül, political inexperience and the arming of the opposition against the harsh intervention of the regime were other obstacles to the continuation of peaceful protests.

The seventh part of the study includes a comparison of different leaders and resources of the activists in the two countries. One of the findings presented in this section is that Syrian activists, who lacked experience in protests, had difficulty in building relationships of trust by alleviating the fears of internet users. For this reason, experienced activists on the ground during the uprisings in Syria mobilized the public to participate in the protests. Egyptian opponents, on the other hand, benefited from their online and offline experience and were able to use ICT and other resources more effectively during protests.

In summary, this study seeks answers to how protests are managed in the digital age by comparing youth activism in Egypt and Syria. As Özgül emphasizes in her conclusion, these digitally supported protests did not bring the expected change to Arab society but did instill a culture of rebellion in these societies. Özgül quotes Middle East expert Professor Asef Bayat in stating that, social change in authoritarian states is possible only with the active citizenship of each of the social groups in the society (p. 234).

In conclusion, *Leading Protests in the Digital Age* provides an efficient resource for readers, especially those interested in the Arab Spring uprisings. Interviews with activists who experienced the protests and participated in online events in Egypt and Syria, give the reader a closer look at what is happening in these countries. The uprisings in Syria caused

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a massive immigration wave that affected many countries. The most affected country by this refugee crisis is Turkey. Turkey's hosting of nearly 4 million Syrian refugees makes this research especially meaningful to Turk-

ish readers. Therefore, the study is a useful resource for readers from different disciplines such as journalism, sociology and political science, and academics working on the Syrian refugee issue.