

## Testimony

# Heroic Resolve in the Face of the Omnipresent Machine of Oppression

## Recounting the Events of the Tunisian Revolution

When Mohamed Bouazizi set fire to himself inside the governor's office in the Tunisian city of Sidi Bouzid, this act would ignite the spark which erupted into an intifada (uprising) by the city's locals, and those in its neighboring towns and villages (Meknassy, Sidi Ali Ben Aoun, Jilma, Menzel Bouzaiane, Mezzouna, Regueb...). This spontaneous uprising expressed the extent of the resentment and frustration felt by the

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people living in the entire area, due to rising unemployment, the total lack in basic resources and pervasive corruption in state apparatuses.

Thus on Saturday morning, December 17, 2010, in an act of rage and protest, Mohamed Bouazizi committed suicide by burning himself alive after all the avenues to a life of dignity were closed to him. The municipal police had once again forbidden him from setting up a stand to sell goods near the city market, destroyed his cart, and insulted, humiliated and threatened him in front of passers-by. It is also important to note that Mohamed Bouazizi was a university graduate and a native of the city. He came from a large family that suffered from poverty, unemployment and a lack of opportunities and resources; he was also his family's sole provider.

As soon as news of the suicide spread, large numbers of people headed to the governor's office, blaming the authorities and the state for what had happened, and condemning the marginalization and oppression that characterized the relationship between the authorities and citizens. The masses gathered before the governor's office, demanding more information about the fate of Mohammed (who had been immediately transferred to the trauma burn hospital in Sidi Ben Arous in the capital city, Tunis). A large police force was unable to disperse the crowds. Matters quickly escalated into an outright protest and mass demonstration, where the people raised posters carrying slogans such as "shame, shame on the government..." "your prices ignited the fire" and demanded "justice from the thief's gangs".

Bouazizi's suicide was the tipping point in the miserable economic and social reality which Sidi Bouzid had been experiencing. And, in its spontaneity, the people's mobilization was spurred by a fundamental awareness that the government's propaganda machine would quickly churn out the claim that this was "an isolated incident". In response, the people armed themselves with protest slogans that demanded social justice, an equitable redistribution of the country's wealth, the elimination of corruption and the right to more employment opportunities.

For the entire day of December 17, Sidi Bouzid lived to the beat of mass popular demonstrations and gatherings. Several times during the day, entrances to the city and its main sites witnessed violent clashes with police forces, which responded to the people's slogans with tear gas, and replied to their demands for



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dignity with brutal beatings, detentions and arrests. It was an exceptional night for Sidi Bouzid. Clashes between angry young men and the police forces continued late into the night. On Sunday, as news spread of the arrests of around 50 young men from the city, protests escalated even further, as it was common knowledge that that the arrests meant possible torture for those arrested or imprisoned on fabricated charges.

The city would witness violent clashes between the people and the now heavily armed police forces, which were joined by reinforcements from Sfax and Tozeur. These clashes took place in the neighborhoods of Wilad Shalabi, al-Awadi, al-Noor al-Gharbi, al-Brahimiya, Wilad Belhadi and al-Khadra'a. The local authorities also relied on state-backed militias to track down protestors, and to harass and terrorize them. Security agents and informants pursued protesters in order to gather information on potential mobilizations and to uncover those who played an active role in these mobilizations. These agents attempted to infiltrate and break the ranks of the activists. But despite these tactics, the people of Sidi Bouzid persisted and carried on with their actions, united in their right to equitable wealth distribution and justice. They chanted slogans of protest (true to their Tunisian dialect): "We demand the release of all detainees", "The people are hungry", "Our lands have been expropriated", "The thief's gangsters must be brought to justice", "Work... freedom... and national dignity"...

Monday coincided with the first day of the entrance examinations for graduates in Sidi Bouzid. The city was to host thousands of graduates from outlying districts, towns and cities from all the governorate's administrative districts, who had come to sit for their first round of examinations. Authorities anticipated some kind of student mobilization, especially in the highly charged and tense environment of the previous two days, and aware that it would elevate the aspirations of "unemployed teachers" and encourage them to join the



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demonstrations in protest against their own fragile and miserable conditions, and thus the city became totally "militarized". Police reinforcements were deployed to all major intersections, inside "active" neighborhoods, and in front of government buildings and the ruling party's headquarters.

These examinations created an opportunity for the people to meet, and be united in their pain. It became an opportunity to expand the protests from the center of the governorate to its periphery. In steady progression, the contagion of public, mass popular protests began to spread to almost every city, town and village in the Sidi Bouzid governorate.

By Tuesday, the entire Sidi Bouzid area was in a heightened state of resistance and struggle against their social, economic and political marginalization and the misery they had suffered for so long. These popular movements succeeded in maintaining their resolve, resilience and cohesiveness despite the difficult circumstances and conditions in which they were operating. Their unity was the most important factor in their increased power and strength.

In the city of Sidi Bouzid, protests would continue with the support of many unions. Demonstrations, protests and sit-ins were organized, while young men in the city repeatedly clashed with the police. In the nearby towns and villages, Meknassy would witness popular mobilization and protests that would last an entire week, as people demanded work and the right to equitable wealth distribution that would provide opportunities for success

in life, improvement in living conditions, and the right to dignity. The police responded to these demands by calling in even greater reinforcements and clashed with the young

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men who heroically defended their city. Unity and victory were alive in these daily battles between young men, armed with the justice of their cause, and the police, heavily armed with tear gas and rubber bullets. In the town of Menzel Bouzaiane, demonstrators took to the streets, protests and sit-ins were organized, and protestors clashed with police deployed at the entrance of the city and in the town's major streets. The same was true for Sidi Ali Ben Aoun and Regueb and to a lesser extent in Jilma and Mezzouna.

What further enraged people was the way in which the official and state media dealt with the protests. The local audio-visual and print media remained silent about these events, and if it did mention Sidi Bouzid, it did so only from the perspective of "accomplishments" and "gains". Indeed, as Tunisians received transparent and reliable information from "foreign" news channels (France 24, Al Jazeera, BBC, Al Arabiya, etc.) and social networking sites (Facebook, Twitter, etc.), they became more and more convinced that once again, the official state media was operating according to the prevalent official instruments of coercion by withholding information and falsifying facts and events.

Popular mobilizations continued for a week in Sidi Bouzid and its nearby cities. Whereas the suicide of Mohamed Bouazizi (which was followed by the suicide of Hussein Naji on Wednesday) was the event that directly ignited the intifada, the real causes were fundamentally rooted in the deteriorating economic and social

conditions which burdened the entire Sidi Bouzid region. Indeed, these mobilizations became a catalyst, and spread and become further entrenched the social ills remained unaddressed. Despite claims that emergency measures would be taken (such as the convening of emergency meetings, and the presentation of a 'reform' package by the Ministers of Development and Information), the people were very well aware that such initiatives were little more than mere palliatives and further attempts to deceive them, 'to throw ash in their eyes' (as the saying in Arabic goes). The people's anger and general awareness of the need for change in their lives fortified the popular mobilizations and prevented them from weakening or reverting to square one, which meant extreme poverty and marginalization, and the plague of unemployment, misery and exploitation.

When the second week of protests began, the people's demands as well as their defense of their interests had become more firmly rooted. Severe clashes with the police would continue, particularly in the towns of Menzel Bouzaiane and Mekkassy. The police used brute force and live ammunition in clashes with protesters, raided activists' homes and made arbitrary arrests. The outcome of this arrogant police behaviour was the martyrdom of a young man, Mohammad Al-Ammari, an unemployed graduate from the Fine Arts Institute. News of the young man's martyrdom further inflamed protesters and boosted their persistence, resilience and resistance in the entire area.

Sidi Bouzid and its surrounding towns were transformed into cantons of progressive national struggle. Meanwhile, the heavily armed militias and police forces operating under orders to kill, continued to employ brutal methods to stamp out the popular uprisings. Police methods included: the heavy use of tear gas, laying siege to entire neighborhoods, intensive reinforcements, the use of police dogs, the use of rubber and live bullets, storming impounded car lots and storage supplies, cutting off electricity and the internet, etc. But despite this

brutality, which also included the fabrication and falsification of facts on the ground, and the depiction of victims as criminals by the state media (as well as other forms of tyranny against unarmed, popular protests), the protestors and demonstrators continued in their perseverance, providing the world with the finest example of resistance.

### **The Torch Passes from Sidi Bouzid to Kasserine (and Thala)**

It is well known that the conditions that drove the people of Sidi Bouzid to protest and clash with the state's and the ruling party's security apparatus, were also prevalent – perhaps, even to a harsher extent – in all the nearby areas, especially the Siliana-Gabès belt which includes Kef, Kasserine, Kairouan, Gafsa and Kébili. Very high levels of unemployment in these regions, especially amongst university graduates, and limited social services, which include the absence of university hospitals and decent health facilities, forced residents to leave their towns. The regions had little appeal and limited conditions for investment, and suffered from weak infrastructure, modest capacity-building institutions and a complete absence of higher education institutions. All this is not withstanding rampant corruption, rising levels of poverty whose appalling manifestations made these regions susceptible to an explosion similar to that which took place in Sidi Bouzid.

By the end of December, signs of such social eruptions began to appear. The cities of Kasserine and Thala became major centers of unrest and tension where tens of thousands of people took to the streets in support of Sidi Bouzid, demanding social justice and their immediate share in the country's development. For the first time since the mobilizations had begun, protestors raised the now memorable slogan (which became the mantra of all Arab people demanding change in their countries) that ignited the flame in every single Tunisian negatively affected by the policies of Ben Ali... "The people demand the downfall of the regime".

Kasserine and Thala witnessed the most decisive demonstrations and protests up until that point; and protests began to progressively spread and edge towards the other areas in Tunisia, particularly the interior. Despite the massive security presence and reinforcements sent by the Ministry of Interior to the region, the people – to the astonishment of everyone – inspired true hope in all Tunisians that it was actually possible to bring down the regime. The extent of their heroic resolve pushed the young people of Thala on January 5, to write on the entrance to their city, "Thala is the Stalingrad of North Africa", in protest against the brutal repression of their small city (population of almost 40,000), as well as celebrate their brave and noble resistance.

Meanwhile, there was a gradual change in the way Tunisians viewed the events taking place in their country. When the incidents began, Tunisians had spoken hesitantly and in fear about the "isolated protests" in Sidi Bouzid. But when the outlying cities and towns entered the fray against the security services, the will of the Tunisians was fortified, and suddenly, it became permissible to talk about "a social movement with a political vision". As the protests in Kasserine and Thala came to a head, and with the entire world watching the battles taking place between defenseless

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Tunisian youth and the heavily armed security forces, the term "popular intifada" was used for the first time.

The foundations of the regime began to crumble. The pretexts used by Ben Ali depicting the protests as the work of "hostile groups" and "hooligans who had nothing to do

with patriotism” lost all credibility. The resolve of Tunisians strengthened. They began to truly believe that there was real hope for change and that change could and would happen.

A critical juncture was Saturday, January 8, when security forces resorted to the use of live ammunition (after using tear gas, hot water cannons, rubber bullets, raids and arrests) against demonstrators. In one night, 62 martyrs fell in Thala and Kasserine. This unprecedented brutality marked the transformation of the “popular intifada” into “the people’s revolution”.

The news of this huge number of martyrs, who fell in one night, resonated throughout the country. On the morning of Sunday, January 9, control of these areas finally fell to the “revolutionaries”, who demanded that the punishment of the murderers be promptly carried out. Enraged, they took control of state headquarters and institutions, as well as the premises of the ruling party (otherwise known as the RCD: The Rally for Constitutional Democracy). They expelled the security forces as part of a popular grassroots wave which was unprecedented in modern Tunisia following the end of French colonization. Much of the “Tunisian Interior” fell out of the control of the state and its security apparatus.

This newfound independence was reinforced by the bold stand taken by local and regional associations, as well as the General Union of Tunisian Workers (UGTT), the National (Bar) Association of Lawyers, and the General Union of Tunisian Students (which declared their resistance by organizing partial strikes, sit-ins and protest marches). The retreat of the regime would begin after the politically, morally and ethically scandalous murder of innocent people was exposed and after the “great barrier of fear”, which had shackled the Tunisian people for so many decades, finally fell. The revolution moved forward with mass protests finally coming to the fore in the capital city Tunis, marking it as the revolution’s most defining moment.

### January 14: A Rendezvous with History

Classes were cancelled on January 10 in the wake of the wave of student protests that swept the country. The authorities launched a “preemptive” campaign of arbitrary arrests in an attempt to terrorize the people. They brutalized unionists and lawyers, banned gatherings, and harassed and threatened anyone who attempted to organize any form of support. Internet sites were shut down and communications scrambled in tens of cities and villages. As these events were taking place, the Tunisian interior (i.e. two-thirds of the country) was transformed into territory “liberated” from the grips of Ben Ali’s authority. The slogans of the revolution would now become exceptionally political: “Down with the RCD”; “Down with the people’s executioner and torturer”; “Down with the regime of October 7th<sup>1</sup>, down with the fascist and traitor.”

The last hour of the regime would eventually come with the clashes that broke out between young people in the Tadamon District (the largest district in the capital, Tunis, which includes the most poverty-stricken and marginalized neighborhoods in the city) and security forces on the night of January 11. The crisis reached Tunis, for the first time, since December 17. The regime had tried to use all of its brute force and power to neutralize Tunis, and keep it isolated from the events taking place in the rest of the country. Its desperate reaction in the capital city heralded the collapse of the very foundations of the regime.

The confrontations in Tadamon were very bloody and violent and culminated in the take-over by young men of most of the neighborhoods and roads in this huge district. The use of rubber bullets and tear gas by security forces in these clashes only further inflamed feelings of rage and indignation amongst the people. Thus, as soon as news of the people’s victory in Tadamon spread, the uprising extended to other neighborhoods and districts in Tunis (al-Karem, al-Malasin, Al-Sayadeh, Hay Ibn Khaldun, al-Kibariya, al-Jabal al-Akhdar, etc.), as part of the tidal wave of “the revolution”.

<sup>1</sup> Ben Ali ascended to the presidency on 7 October 1987.

It was at this point that the regime imposed a curfew and called in the army to protect state institutions, thus entering into a stage of blind suppression.

On the morning of January 14, all of Tunisia, from north to south, called forth in one voice “The people demand the overthrow of the regime”. The state’s repression did not succeed

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in silencing the roar of the masses, which, in the early morning hours, found its way to the largest street in Tunis, Habib Bourguiba Avenue, the street that has always been the shining light of the capital, but was also one of the security zones in which the authorities always prohibited any form of demonstration or protest.

A massive protest of over 500,000 participants, marched towards the Ministry of the Interior building, an immense structure which represented and symbolized the regime; a structure in which tens of young men languished in its dark corridors, tortured in the backdrop of the mobilizations and protest movements. The march succeeded in breaking and penetrating the security fortifications, and reached its

goal. The masses continued to protest and formed a massive sit-in in front of the ministry, demanding that Ben Ali and the Trabelsis be banished from Tunisia (the Trabelsis are the family of Leila Ben Ali, infamous in Tunisia for their corruption on all fronts, whether political, financial or administrative and appropriation of commissions). They also demanded that all those responsible for killing protestors be held accountable, and that all political prisoners be released immediately.

It was truly a historic moment; a moment reported by the media that resonated throughout the Arab world from the Atlantic Ocean to the Gulf. It was the moment in which the people chanted out, in one voice and in one movement, in front of the Ministry of the Interior, “*Dégage!*” (“Clear Out!”). It was the moment that the regime finally and truly fell, and not through the use of force. Immediately following this, bullets were fired at protesters, chaos ensued, and in memorable historic scenes, Tunisians faced state violence with a show of solidarity, perseverance, and martyrdom.

On the evening of January 14, as the masses were liberating neighborhoods and streets, a formal announcement was made from outside Tunisia that Ben Ali had fled to an unknown place. Despite the uncertain situation and the imposed curfew, the Tunisians could not be prevented from expressing their joy over their victorious revolution in the face of one of the most notorious dictators in the Third World. Since then, Tunisians have continued to protect their achievements, taking stock of the effort it took to topple their dictator. They are aware that they must persist in overthrowing all the remaining elements of the former dictatorship, its instruments of government, way of thinking and its structures.