

# Tahrir Square

## *Choosing the Right Place for the Wrong Reasons*

By Hazem Kandil

IN THE *Age of Revolution: Europe 1789-1848*, Eric Hobsbawm draws a vivid image of how radicals in the mid-nineteenth century believed their hoped-for revolutions would unfold:

“Barricades would go up in the capital; the revolutionaries would make for the palace, parliament or the city hall . . . and proclaim . . . a provisional government. The country would then accept the new regime . . . [which] would then give brotherly aid to other revolutions which, almost certainly, would have also occurred.”

Clearly, the first step in this grand vision was to occupy a number of key locations in the capital, and the hope was for revolution to spread from one country to the other. Little wonder then that the popular uprisings that seized the Arab world in 2011 have triggered a flurry of articles (including one by Hobsbawm himself) comparing the so-called Arab Spring to the 1848 revolutions in Europe. One of the primary causes of this far-fetched analogy is that Arab and European revolutionaries supposedly employed the same tactic, namely, the occupying of public spaces and the setting up of barricades to resist fierce attempts by the security forces to brush them away. But similarities in tactics should not overshadow the differences in strategy. A closer look at exactly where nineteenth-century revolutionaries erected their barricades—“palace, parliament or the city hall”—reveals this vital difference.



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A revolutionary situation is defined by sociologist Charles Tilly (building on the practical wisdom of unmatched revolutionary strategist Leon Trotsky) as one of “dual power,” a situation where rising and incumbent regimes contest authority in a way that splits the state apparatus into two and destabilizes the established order. Thus, to render a situation truly revolutionary, dissidents must concentrate enough state power in their own hands to credibly claim that they are representing a new government and demand domestic and international recognition and aid. The types of public spaces one needs to occupy to support such a claim are key state institutions, institutions that not only embody state sovereignty (parliament, for instance), but also ones essential to everyday government (state media, police stations, public banks, municipal buildings, etc.). Occupation here is geared toward helping revolutionaries participate in managing state and society, or at least preventing its rival—the soon-to-be *ancien régime*—from running them as smoothly as it did before.

With this theoretical background in mind, let us move on to consider what actually happened in Cairo, whose

Tahrir Square became the symbol of all Arab revolts. The popular uprising, which began on January 25, 2011, culminated in a Friday of Rage three days later, when no less than a million demonstrators made their way to the city's historic downtown neighborhood, built in the nineteenth-century to resemble the circular layout and architecture of central Paris. Although demonstrators poured into the area from different directions, the bulk of them got stuck in a daylong tug-of-war with the security forces on the Qasr al-Nil bridge, the western key to downtown. After an epic battle, police units pulled back and the road ahead was clear. At this critical point, the revolutionaries had a choice to make: where should they turn to next? Leftward, to the Egyptian Radio and Television Union building, the regime's central media organ, with the Foreign Ministry adjacent to it; or rightward, to the seat of parliament, the cabinet headquarters and the Interior Ministry, the nerve center of Egypt's police state; or straight ahead, as was originally intended before the sudden police collapse, to Tahrir Square. They opted for the latter, providing the regime with valuable time to dispatch military units to each of these strategic sites. And so when a few dozen demonstrators, suspecting they might have made the wrong choice, tried to make their way to some of these sites later that night, the roads were already sealed by tanks and armored vehicles.

Let us consider why the demonstrators preferred to occupy a giant public square (approximately 490,000 square feet with the capacity to host perhaps a million people) rather than sensitive state organs, and how their choice on that fateful night determined the revolt's trajectory. Everyone knew that seizing a central downtown plaza would not stifle life in a sprawling city like Cairo, nor was it likely to make traffic on its congested roads any worse than it already was. Also, unlike the narrow alleyways and crammed-up buildings in the capital's popular neighborhoods, the square was an open ground with nowhere to hide. So if the demonstrator's plan was neither to paralyze the city nor to be able to maneuver if forced into street battles, then what did they have in mind? It seems obvious that the only advantage such an expansive and exposed location offered was *visibility*. For a strategy based on galvanizing domestic and world opinion and daring the regime to shoot civilians in front of hundreds of cameras and news reporters, Tahrir Square (and other

central squares throughout Egypt's provincial cities) fit perfectly. And it seemed to work. After more than two weeks of occupation, the military were induced to settle old accounts with their political masters and pressure the president to resign. Only then, however, did the defects of this choice of location become clear.

With the distraction of world opinion (with its familiar short attention span), and the disillusionment of most Egyptians (as inevitably happens in any revolution), Tahrir Square sit-ins no longer stirred public sympathy.



Tahrir Square in the 1940s at left and in 2011 above.

And out of the limelight, the square proved to be nothing more than a giant trap. By force of habit, continued state repression (which occurred in monthly cycles throughout the previous year) would drive protestors into the square, where they would be quickly surrounded by military and security forces using hastily built concrete walls to block off the protestor's access to strategic sites. The square would then be effectively sealed off as life outside continued as normal, and government troops waited for the revolutionary steam to run out. First, furious activists would set up their tents and vow to occupy the square until the regime was fundamentally reformed. Within a few weeks, however, they come face to face with their worst enemy, what Egyptians now mockingly refer to as "revolution-



Author in front one of the concrete walls that block access from Tahrir Square to the Interior Ministry.

ary boredom.” Ignored by rulers and citizens alike, with nothing to do in this open-air prison but to chant or debate, and at the mercy of cruel weather conditions (too hot or too cold depending on the season, given the lack of shelter), their numbers would dwindle from tens of thousands to a hundred or less, allowing government forces to chase them away with relative ease. The square was then opened to traffic until a new cycle began.

Why did the revolutionary activists think it would go any other way? Arab revolts that have succeeded in overthrowing their regimes (such as in Libya) or are probably on the road to doing so (as in Syria) have managed to produce the dual sovereignty character of revolutionary situations by activists occupying government buildings, entrenching themselves in crowded neighborhoods, seizing entire cit-

ies and using all these as bases for incrementally supplanting the regime. But Egyptian demonstrators drew inspiration neither from 1848 Europe nor from neighboring Arab experiments in 2011, but from an entirely different revolutionary wave: Eastern Europe in 1989. The dazzling success of peaceful and civilized demonstrators in overturning their communist regimes was enviable, and occupying plazas and wide boulevards seemed to be a viable strategy. But the missing ingredient in Egypt was, of course, the radically different international situation. With the Soviet patron of the ailing communist regimes of Eastern Europe retrenching, and the anxious capitalist world, spearheaded by the United States and the European Union, determined not to allow the chance to slip by, demonstrators in 1989 were offered every possible form of help, including sustained media attention and Western ul-

matums against the regime’s violent repression. In Egypt, by contrast, the authoritarian regime had been serving the interests of the strongest regional and world powers. After the initial wave of international support subsided, the country’s military rulers were allowed (regardless of American and European rhetoric) to slowly liquidate the revolt, or do whatever was necessary to return to business as usual.

This strategy of occupying visible (and harmless) spaces makes sense when the goal of the demonstrators is to draw public attention or to shock people out of their lethargy, as the Occupy movement in the United States purportedly aims to. It could also work when you have major international powers lined up behind you. At most, massive and persistent sit-ins could delegitimize the regime, persuading its leaders that the time has come for wide top-down sociopolitical reforms, whether real or cosmetic. But if the goal is not to spread political consciousness or to mobilize public opinion, but rather to “Overthrow the Regime” (the signature chant of the Arab Spring revolutionaries), then occupying strategic sites is the necessary first step in the uphill struggle for regime change. In this situation, channeling the sea of angry demonstrators into occupation of innocuous open grounds stakes the future of the revolution on three unlikely factors: that popular energy would not dissipate; that (domestic and international) media attention would not be diverted elsewhere; and that the regime’s coercive organs would remain forever patient—a gamble which amounts to political suicide. **P<sup>2</sup>**