

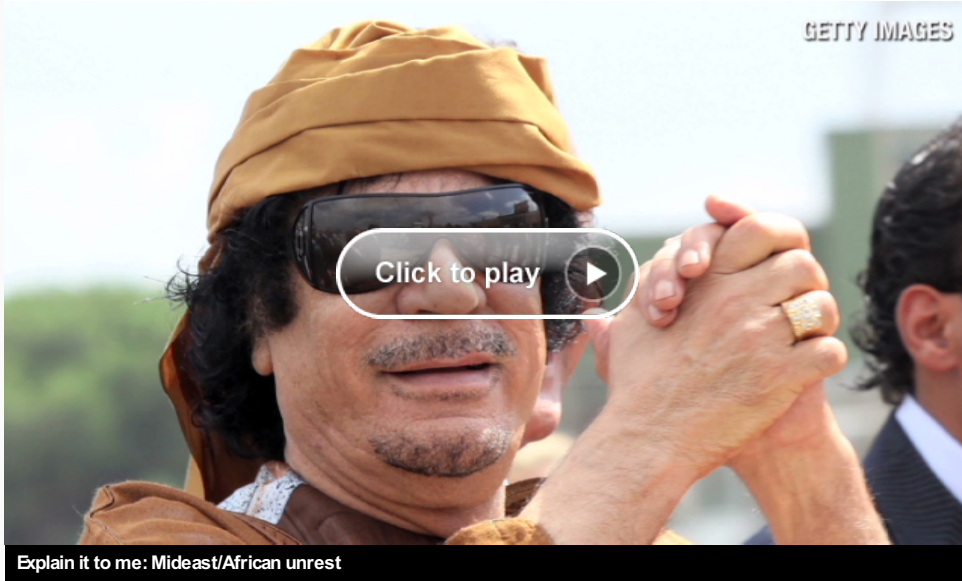


# Collective courage fuels protests across Arab world

By **Eliott C. McLaughlin**, CNN  
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Explain it to me: Mideast/African unrest

### STORY HIGHLIGHTS

- Cable, social networking allow people to witness revolutions, plan own protests
- Mohamed Bouazizi's suicide provided tipping point for countries already on brink
- Bravery of players like Wael Chonim and Emran al-Obeidi have helped spur rebellions
- Protests have been historically crushed in many countries experiencing unrest

(CNN) -- Mohamed Bouazizi couldn't have known when he struck that match he would spark the "Arab spring," but it's tough to imagine he'd be disappointed.

Bouazizi's singular act of protest -- to light himself afire before a government building in Tunisia's Sidi Bouzid -- set off one of the most collective demonstrations the region has seen in contemporary times.

His uncle, Ridha, a fellow fruit-cart vendor, said the government often demanded bribes and stole goods from them. His nephew's death, he said, was a result of corruption.

"It was because of their tyranny that Mohamed set himself on fire," he said.

Tyranny, it must be noted, was not something new to Tunisia. Before President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali's ouster, protests were violently quelled. Citizens there had long complained of political repression, corruption and a denial of opportunity in a country where unemployment and rising food prices are oppressors in themselves.

It would seem that the 26-year-old's martyrdom was not so much driven by tyranny as it was his refusal to fear the tyrants -- or death -- any longer.

Four months later, look around the Mideast and North Africa -- where protests have rippled west to Mauritania and Morocco and east to Iran and Oman -- and you can see how people across the region saw Bouazizi's plight as their own and how his courage became a contagion.

His life, after all, was a microcosm of the region's woes.



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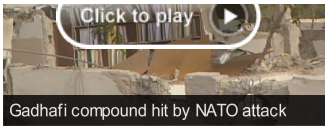
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### One man's woes speak to many

Bouazizi was the family breadwinner, a man who dropped out of school so his sister could attend instead. After years of harassment as he pushed his cart around town for \$10 a day, he snapped when a police official accosted him and absconded with his scales on December 17.

[Read more about the man who kickstarted the uprisings](#)

The story encapsulates the economic hardships endemic in the region, the fruit cart a measure of determination and livelihood and his salary the mark of opportunity denied. The police official represents corruption, not only of law enforcement but of a state where officials climb to power on the backs of a broken citizenry.

And Bouazizi's self-immolation exemplifies what happens when a country stands up because it's sick of living on its knees.

Protests in the Mideast and Africa are being fueled by a similar determination, a collective courage that lends itself from one revolution to the next. Each country has its own Bouazizis crying "no more!" after years of oppression.

They are taking to the streets, convinced that it's better to be shot, beaten, tortured or killed than it is to continue remaining silent under the thumb of a morally bankrupt regime.

There has been a broad range of responses. Countries such as Oman and Jordan have offered concessions and promised to get people back on their feet. Yemen's leader has presented an offer to step down, while Libya's ruler of 42 years, Col. Moammar Gadhafi, has sent troops to wage all-out war against the rebels. Civilians are apparently not off limits.

### In Libya, pen vs. sword

Yet in a government building-turned-cultural center in the rebel stronghold of Benghazi, Libyan artists sketch taunting caricatures of Gadhafi as musicians pen songs devoted to the revolution.

[Watch who represents the 'true' Libya](#)

MC Swat is one of those emboldened to lash out at the regime.

Asked what would have happened if his rhymes had contained similar content before the uprising, he did not hesitate to surmise.

"I would be shot dead like Tupac," the rapper replied.

Eman al-Obeidy said she was expressly warned she would end up like the American rapper -- in the middle of a state prosecution office, no less. The 29-year-old lawyer caught the world's attention when she rushed into Tripoli's Rixos Hotel, claiming she had been kidnapped and gang-raped by 15 of Gadhafi's men.

"Brutally tortured to the point of them entering weapons inside of me," al-Obeidy did not hush, even after government minders whisked her away from the hotel. Nor was she dissuaded when Libyan state television accused her of being mentally unstable and a prostitute.

Determined that her attackers should not roam the streets freely, al-Obeidy decided to "seek the path of law." She was arrested again -- this time, for going to court -- and there, an employee pulled out a gun and "threatened to kill me in the middle of the prosecution department," she said.

[Read and watch why al-Obeidy lives in fear](#)

She continued to seek out media, conducting interviews with CNN,



NPR and The Associated Press "so the whole world can know what's happening in Libya," she said.

"Libya has lived many, many years without media exposure, without knowing the facts. Let the world know what's happening," she told CNN.

Between Tunisia, where the Arab spring commenced, and Libya, its present epicenter, putting personal safety aside for the betterment of a nation is rapidly becoming a theme.

### Bravery in Egypt

Take Wael Ghonim, the Egyptian activist who helped spur the protests that toppled President Hosni Mubarak after 30 years at the helm. He was arrested and detained for 10 days. No one knew where he was, not even his family.

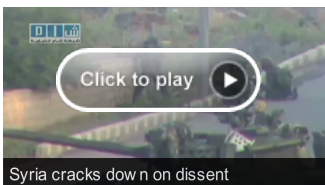


He was interrogated intensively about the protests -- how they started, who organized them -- letting him know the government was serious in its quest to crush the dissidents. Upon his release, he could have covered out of sight and kept mum.



But no. He made himself more visible, addressing throngs in Cairo's Tahrir Square, demanding apologies from the government's upper echelon and asserting that it was "no longer the time to negotiate" with Mubarak's regime.

[Watch how Ghonim became a hero](#) 🇪🇬



Mubarak fell shortly thereafter, signaling to the region's leaders that they would have to at least ponder their people's demands rather than simply send out security forces to shut them up. Many of these rulers (think Syria, Yemen, Libya) had hitherto seemed untouchable.



In Yemen, where they are fed up with President Ali Abdullah Saleh's 33-year rule, looming water shortages, unemployment, corruption and political repression, citizens set aside their fear of the government, and of each other. Longstanding grievances have been dismissed in the name of unity.

"Tribes who have long-term revenge issues are coming to the protests peacefully and united. ... They are living in harmony with one voice and in agreement that they want Saleh out," Yemeni journalist Afrah Nasser said.

### Resistance in surprising locations

In Sudan and Syria, the uprisings may be even more remarkable because the countries have long and well-documented histories of putting down revolts.

Southern Sudan, which is slated for statehood in July, saw one out of every five residents killed by war, famine or disease during decades of civil war. About 80% of the population has been displaced at least once, according to the U.S. Committee for Refugees, and President Omar al-Bashir faces allegations of war crimes in Darfur, where hundreds of thousands have died. He denies the accusations and refuses to recognize the International Criminal Court.

Darfur residents have nonetheless marched on cities in the north, while 57 people were killed amid violence in Southern Sudan over the weekend.

[Read how a militia leader narrowly escaped](#)

Syrians, meanwhile, have been killed during funeral processions in Douma and Izraa. In Jableh, security forces and secret police have fired on demonstrators without warning and blocked the wounded

from seeking treatment at a local hospital.

Citizens there need look back no further than a generation to recall how opposition to the regime can be met with all-out slaughter. In 1982, responding to an assassination attempt on Hafez al-Assad, the current president's father, security forces converged on Hama, Syria's fourth-largest city at the time.

Under the direction of the president's brother, troops killed at least 10,000 people, according to Amnesty International. A Syrian watchdog group pegs the number closer to 40,000. They also flattened large swaths of the town, including the Old City, a level of devastation recounted by Thomas Friedman in "From Beirut to Jerusalem."

While driving through one Hama neighborhood that had been "plowed up like a cornfield and then flattened," The New York Times correspondent stopped an old man and asked where the houses were.

"You are driving on them," the man replied.

"But where are all the people who used to live here?" Friedman countered.

"You are probably driving on some of them, too," he said.

### **"They shoot on anything that moves"**

Still, Syrians are taking to the streets in protest, even as Human Rights Watch issues warnings of arbitrary detention and torture. Reports also emerged this week that authorities are breaking into homes in Daraa, there are bodies in the streets and ambulances are unable to help because of snipers and 3,000 soldiers in the city.

"They shoot on anything that moves," one witness said.

[Read why questions are being raised about Syria's stability](#)

Similar reports are rampant through the region:

-- In Mauritania, police have occupied a city square and attacked sit-ins.

-- A crowd in Djibouti, a small nation in the Horn of Africa, was attacked by riot police during a call to evening prayer.

-- Pro-government gangs in Taiz, Yemen, opened fire on protesters.

-- Islamists and pro-government demonstrators clashed violently in al-Zarq, Jordan.

-- The United Arab Emirates has arrested a human rights activist and four others on charges that include opposing the government.

## **They absorb the courage of their comrades.**

—Jerrold Post, director of George Washington University's political psychology program



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-- Bahrain has responded to unrest in a way that prompted 18 opposition figures to resign from the government as Human Rights Watch investigates the deaths of several protesters.

Demonstrators in these countries and others cite similar grievances: poverty, unemployment, escalating food prices, corruption, lack of political and other freedoms, human rights abuses or some combination thereof.

Communications is another common thread, said Jerrold Post, director of the political psychology program at George Washington University. With the possible exception of North Korea, there is no such thing as "an electronically dark country" these days, he explained.

[Can we call this the Facebook revolution?](#)

People can watch rebellion unfold on 24/7 cable networks such as CNN and Al Jazeera. They can discuss and organize their own revolutions on Facebook and Twitter -- perhaps not with impunity, but without fears that the government is listening in on every phone call.

"An individual can feel totally intimidated, but when he feels he is part of a collective -- and when his identity becomes rebel or freedom fighter -- they start to believe, 'We can do together what I as an individual cannot,' " Post said.

"They absorb the courage of their comrades."

### Confident change can come

Having seen Egypt's and Tunisia's longtime rulers fall, protesters now feel confident that change and prosperity can come to their own homelands. With their citizens' fears suppressed, totalitarian governments are left without their primary tool for controlling the masses and state media are rendered toothless.

Communications, it seems, was the gasoline, and it took only a spark to light the Mideast and Africa ablaze. Like Bouazizi, protesters have set their fears aside, freeing them to do and say things they've never felt free to do or say before -- at least not in public.

Just a few weeks ago, MC Swat considered it unthinkable to issue a threat to Gadhafi, but last week he was bold enough to do just that.

"Tomorrow we will take over our land," he rhymed in Arabic with CNN's cameras rolling. "Moammar, we're coming with a mass revolution."

CNN's Reza Sayeh, Jennifer Deaton, Nic Robertson, Ivan Watson, Catriona Davies, Rima Maktabi and Jomana Karadsheh contributed to this report.



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**trophy3** I agree with ktrvitre. Of course the U.S. government will not try to stop the uprisings and if they do France, Italy, England, The U.N. and N.A.T.O. will send air strikes and weapons to help the rebels. They can likely get help from most of the muslim countries.

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**JulieWorth** Courage is contagious--Julian Assange

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**yankerwank** I'm gonna guess "collective" is the new liberal buzz word. Maybe it is replacing "children" and racism. Is this ethical?

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**ktrvitre**

There's a lesson to be learned from all of this: the rioting, revolution etc. going on in the Middle East and North Africa is going to happen in the West also. It's only a matter of time. Our present way of doing things no longer works. The signs are all around us even today. As we observe the ... [more](#)

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