

Liberation Square: Inside the Egyptian Revolution and the Rebirth of a Nation

By Ashraf Khalil

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A Book Review by

Joel Bowerbank

University of Ottawa, Canada

Liberation Square: Inside the Egyptian Revolution and the Rebirth of a Nation is Ashraf Khalil's (2012) inaugural memoir examining the 18-day period referred to as the Egyptian Revolution that took place between January 25th and February 11th, 2011. Khalil embarks on a chronicling of the recent geopolitical, social, and historic conditions leading to the Egyptian Revolution, his personal accounts from Cairo bolstered by eyewitness testimony and sober reflection, and some implicit—though brief—takeaways from the revolution. The book focuses on an insider perspective of the events that unfolded during the Egyptian Revolution, particularly Tahrir Square (Tahrir is Egyptian Arabic for Liberation), leading to the expulsion of Hosni Mubarak and the first stages of consequences for key members on both sides of the conflict. Khalil begins his thorough account with a historical examination and analysis of the conditions leading up to the Egyptian demonstrations in early 2011. Though pre and post context and some musings are provided, the substance of *Liberation Square* comes in the form of Khalil piecing together his own story, eyewitness accounts, interviews, and news reports, the product of which is a lucid examination of a relatively short time period leading up to the ouster of Hosni Mubarak, the second longest serving Arab leader.

Liberation Square is a practical and approachable resource for those new to the subject seeking an insider perspective on a story that is in many ways misunderstood, and provides some deeper context beyond reporting events and a modicum of political speculation. The book concludes slightly before the purportedly free parliamentary and presidential elections in Egypt's modern or ancient history.

At the outset of the book, Khalil embarks on a brief caveat regarding the translations of Egyptian Arabic proper names into English. This translation note acts as a foreshadowing for Khalil's own inability to perfectly convey the cultural significance of many of the chants, visual puns, cultural references, and other nuances unique to the Egyptian language into English. Whether this foreshadowing is intentional or not is unclear; however, it does provide a context for the difficulty one faces when dealing with heavily cultural issues removed from their original cultural context. Khalil manages to make these potentially confusing social nuances surprisingly approachable and relatable—though slightly cumbersome at times—such as when translating chants and slogans verbatim and simply adding that they have a much more comical or political

meaning to an Egyptian. Khalil takes great pains to plainly examine the subtle nuances of the relationship between culture, religion, the role of government, and the complex and often overlooked relationship between the Egyptian military and the Egyptian people. The presumed non-Egyptian majority of the readerships is catered to by laying out these subtle relational implications that, though normal to any Egyptian, are difficult to grasp for a cultural outsider. Furthermore, Khalil skilfully confronts a struggle that contains many contestable and questionable actions through a very human approach, engaging with other journalists, politicians, activists, spectators, and sceptics alike.

The definitive and immersive account peaks with a thrilling description of the action-laden struggle of the Egyptian people engaging in guerrilla combat with police forces to take Tahrir Square. In its capacity as a journalistic account, both well sourced and written, *Liberation Square* accomplishes what it sets out to do by providing a context, *raison d'être*, and immediate social impact of the Egyptian Revolution.

Despite his approachable style, gripping accounts, and lucid historical and circumstantial analysis, Khalil overlooks a major terminological point. Within the subtitle of the book, the reader is introduced to the events that took place as a “revolution”, though the issue of whether or not the events of early 2011 in Egypt can indeed be called a revolution is simply assumed and not explored by the author. Only in the epilogue does Khalil address the point of what makes an event a revolution. Khalil dedicates only a single line to the issue, calling Egypt’s 1952 revolution, “really more of an extremely popular coup than a true revolution” (2012: 307). Though there are clear and ample differences between the changing of hand that yielded power in Egypt during the 1952 revolution and its purported 2011 counterpart, refusing to label one a revolution because of a technicality while assuming the other is without justifications raises some questions about the author’s capacity to remove himself emotionally from the subject matter. This point is further enforced by Khalil’s involvement in the protests, in which his line between journalist, citizen, and activist becomes obfuscated.

Despite some inherent trappings—issues that would almost be expected for any author so deeply immersed and personally connected to the event under examination—*Liberation Square* provides a detailed and captivating account of a complex social phenomenon that will almost certainly be seen as a major turning point in the history of one of the world’s greatest and oldest civilizations.

It is worth noting that *Liberation Square* was published in January 2012, approximately one year removed from the events examined. Though this expeditious publication is timely, it ends somewhat abruptly with some assumptions of the—at the time—upcoming parliamentary and presidential elections in Egypt; assumptions whose laurels are made evident by hindsight.

Overall, *Liberation Square* is a very practical and approachable resource for a non-Egyptian aiming to gain a better understanding of the important events that unfolded in Egypt at the beginning of 2011. Khalil’s immersive account from Tahrir Square and his retelling of events from around Egypt result in a pleasant and informative experience for the reader. Though *Liberation Square* would benefit from a second edition, one can hardly fault the author for producing such a colourful tomb in such a timely manner. Khalil’s memoir of the Egyptian Revolution is a well written, approachable account of a complex social phenomenon that is geared more towards a personal and professional audience, rather than an academic one.

About the Reviewer

Joel Bowerbank holds an M.A. in Communication from the University of Ottawa, specializing in social media and Middle East politics. His research focuses on the impact of social media during the 2011 Egyptian Revolution. He graduated from the University of Toronto, specializing in Communication and Sociology and has done extensive work on individual, group, and governmental use of social media and the Internet.

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