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As an Egyptian-born American who has lived through the surging and receding waves of anti-Muslim misunderstanding, I have always felt compelled to explain my Egyptian, Arab, and Muslim culture to my American neighbors, friends, and family. For many years, I have led groups of Americans to Egypt and other Arab countries to help improve U.S.-Muslim relations by providing experiences for Americans to meet like-minded counterparts committed to addressing poverty, developing their local communities, and promoting interfaith dialogue. Wherever we went both Americans and their Muslim counterparts told us that these encounters were transformative, helping them to shed the stereotypes swirling about the U.S. and the Muslim and the Arab world.

[My Experience With Egypt's Central Security Forces](#)

Since Tuesday evening's escalating protests in Egypt, my friends have been contacting me about my Facebook video and photo re-postings of the demonstrations. They are confused about what is happening and why. After all, for many of them Egypt is a tourist friendly destination offering the best of its ancient past wrapped in five-star luxury. Yet, the situation in Egypt has always been complex and the depth of the Egyptian people's anger at its government is difficult to convey in simple a Facebook post. The fundamental problem is decades of life without personal freedoms; the lack of freedom of speech, assembly, association, press, and religion. The government enforced that through menacing totalitarianism.

Yet while it was not anticipated as to how it would happen, Egyptians were waiting for change. What began on Tuesday as non-violent protests by Egyptian citizens calling for President Hosni Mubarak to "Leave!" has quickly escalated into violence. Although not always obvious to my American friends, Hosni Mubarak has ruled Egypt with an iron hand for 30 years and public frustration has been mounting. Tuesday's initial protest movement was called "Yom AlGhadab," -- translated roughly as the "Day of Anger." It is now being called "The Rage",

perhaps a better translation. The Facebook icon that is being used by many supporters states "Irhal!" -- "Go!" In response, the Egyptian government has sent in the well armed Central Security Forces, a national police force, to quell the demonstrations. Initially showing some restraint, the Security Forces in recent days have brutally cracked down on the demonstrators who, aside from rocks, are unarmed. Egypt's 30 year martial law limits all personal freedoms and Egyptians have never had the right to bear arms. The support for the protests from expatriate Egyptians and other Arabs is enormous and there is a fervor on the "Net" as Egyptians call it. Recognizing the power of the "Twitter" revolution, the government has blocked the country's Internet and mobile communications.

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The first time I understood the long arm of Egypt's martial law was during one such journey. We arrived in Egypt initially believing ourselves to be innocuous. However, by the second day our group quickly attracted the unwelcome attention of Egypt's undercover arm of the Central Security Forces. The much hated "Amn ElMerkazi" are the same forces today's Egyptian protestors are facing. The undercover police had watched our eclectic group -- two African Americans, a Sudanese, several Egyptians, another Arab, and three Caucasians -- load into a minivan, and they had suspected that there were American Jews among us. One, an Orthodox Rabbi, had graciously replaced his yarmuke with a French beret. We were not totally naïve and had warned our delegates beforehand to be careful and reveal their full identities only when we deemed it safe.

From that point on, the security forces followed us everywhere, even placing one

of their officers in our minivan. As he climbed into the van with us, I told the "goon" angrily that while he may be in our van, he wasn't going to join us in our meetings. I glared at him and started to raise my voice until the Egyptians around me told me to settle down.

However, as Americans we were not the ones in danger. It was our Egyptian counterparts that I was concerned about. We scrambled to change the itinerary, cancelling appointments with those we thought most vulnerable. Yet we were determined to not let the purpose of our tour be thwarted by Egypt's restrictions on personal freedoms, especially those of assembly and association. It is illegal for more than four unrelated persons to gather anywhere in Egypt, including private homes.

On another occasion we attempted to bring our American delegation to one of the governorates in the Egyptian Delta. We hoped to hear from a dynamic group of young Egyptian community activists. As we attempted to reach them our plans were rearranged many times. Finally our contacts, increasingly adamant to hold the meeting, bravely decided that, dangerous as it was, they would come to us in Alexandria. We were expecting about 10 men and women who were between the ages of 19 to 26. Now we had to find a meeting place while not appearing to defy the prohibition against assembly.

The Library of Alexandria has stood as a beacon of learning for thousands of years. The original, lost in antiquity, was rebuilt as the Bibliotheca Alexandrina in 2002 through an international effort led by the Mubaraks. The president's wife, Suzanne, claims credit for its grandeur and "manages" its events with a censorship agenda.

Navigating to get a space at the library for a meeting of only 20 revealed to us the suffocating restrictions on freedom of speech. After managing to get to the library's events director through a relative, I spent one hour with her swearing by Allah that we would not discuss religion or politics before she agreed to sign a contract.

The next day, as the Americans entered the library, I "played dumb" to the Security Officer who attempted to stop us, waving my permission slip, smiling and speaking phrases in "Anglo-Arab." Safely inside the conference room we waited,

wondering if the youth group would make it in or be stopped by the Central Forces. The library is across the street from Alexandria University's School of Business, yet when throngs of students pour out after classes daily, the security forces make sure they stay on the university's side of street. They do not want the images of middle class and lower middle class Egyptians, especially conservatively dressed women in face veils, against the background of a Western style posh institution, the Alexandria Library, one of the Mubaraks' vanity projects.

Our youth group from the governorate represented the latter of the two social strata; mostly lower middle class, and some, most likely, wore face veils. They had decided not to travel as a group and were taking the three hour trek to Alexandria by public transportation as private cars were not an option. I was impressed when somehow they negotiated their entry into the library. What ensued was a meeting between American and Egyptians talking about how they want to build bridges of understanding and how these Egyptian youth are passionate about improving the rural community they come from. It was inspiring and life-changing for me and many others present.

But what price did the Egyptians pay? Later we heard that all of them were interrogated by the security forces on the way home. These interrogations in Egypt are menacing threats. They may be an order, without warrant or arrest, to come to the police offices to 'talk'. Or the undercover security forces may make surprise visits to the person's house or, more likely, call on a close relative inquiring on the 'activities.'

So, it is understandable why Egyptian citizens are on the streets today, braving tear gas and rubber bullets, defying curfews and enduring electronic blackouts. Quite simply, they have seen thirty years of suppression and intimidation, and they have had enough.

I worry as I see the Egyptians in the streets courageously fighting, defying the martial law that many of them were born under. They, including many of my own relatives, do not know an Egypt without this oppression. But they want something different. Today many of them are on the streets now demanding the government to "Go." My hope is that they get what they want.