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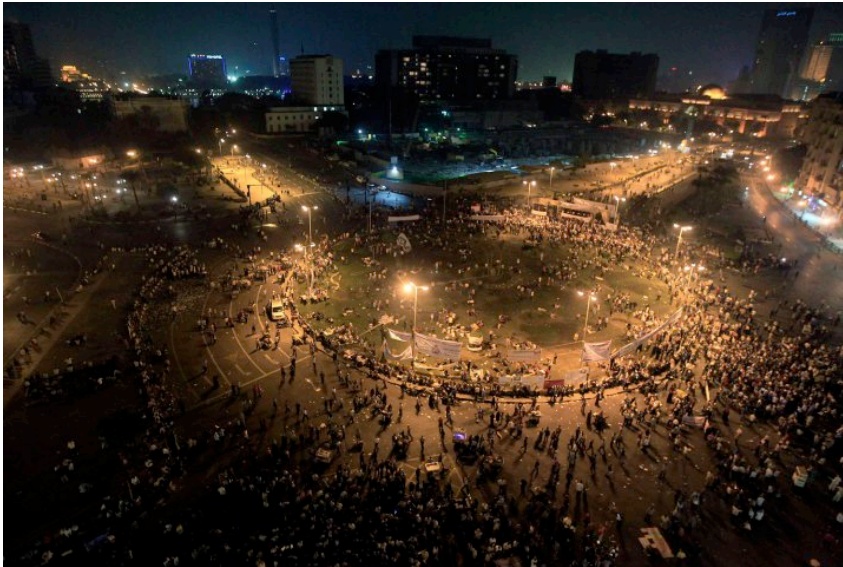
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EGYPT

Dangerous Tahrir: The Vicious Circles in the Square

By Ashraf Khalil / Cairo | Oct. 25, 2012 | 0

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MOHAMED ABD EL GHANY / REUTERS

Egyptians protest against the Muslim Brotherhood and demand for the constitution to be dissolved at Tahrir Square in Cairo, Oct. 19, 2012.

In the past 18 months, I've probably entered Tahrir Square more than 100 times, and I like to think I've developed pretty good instincts about the place. Normally when I think things are going to be dangerous there—with clashes between protesters and the police or among different sets of protesters—I can see it coming and I come equipped.

Over time, I've developed my Tahrir battle kit: extra tight hiking boots just in case I need to run, no wallet—just my Egyptian national ID, a small reporters notebook that slips into my back pocket, a bandana and a small bottle of vinegar to deal with teargas exposure. I travel light and inconspicuous; I keep moving and don't draw a crowd. A modified version of these guidelines kept me relatively safe for two years of reporting in Iraq as well.

The week before last, Tahrir witnessed violent rock-throwing clashes between secularist revolutionary groups opposing President Mohamed Morsy and supporters of Morsy's Muslim Brotherhood. The previous month saw the area engulfed in battles between rock-throwing youth and riot police as tear gas volleys arced into the square.

But last Friday was supposed to be different. The secular Morsy opponents were going to come out in force again, but the Brotherhood—either due to the bad press they had received from the previous week or because they were distracted by their internal party elections that day—had pledged to stay away from Tahrir.

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The primary challenges, I thought, would be estimating crowd size and observing group dynamics among the

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varying factions. My expectations of the day were peaceful enough that I felt fine carrying my laptop into the square and planning to write a dispatch for TIME that evening from a local coffee shop. I even brought my wife with me for a brief tour of the square, something I would never do if there was the tiniest whiff of instability.

The last thing I expected that day was to end up in the middle of a chaotic mob scene.

One of my side-gigs (in addition to writing for TIME) is doing reports for France 24's English Language channel. That night, I had done one standup live-shot at 7 p.m.—as usual splitting a camera position with my French language colleague Sonia Dridi. We had long since developed a practiced rhythm on this. One of us would be chosen to speak first, then the other would quickly switch in with microphone and earpiece to do their live-shot. The whole thing was usually over within six minutes.

Unlike most Tahrir protest Fridays, the local video production company had made a decision to set up their camera position at street level instead of the usual balcony overlooking the square.

But already, even in an earlier live-shot that day, crowd control had been a problem. Large groups of curious onlookers had gathered around the camera setup and made it difficult to hear the news anchor from Paris. It was annoying but merely that; it never felt like a threat.

I wandered the square for a bit more, camped out at coffee shop to write my dispatch and was halfway done when it came time to do a second live-shot at 10:30. So I packed up my computer bag and went to join Sonia.

It is often the tiniest details that set disasters in motion. In retrospect, one of the crucial contributing factors (in addition to the decision to broadcast from street-level) was simply that Sonia's live-shot came first. That meant by the time I arrived at the broadcast position, she was already standing under the bright TV lights and drawing a crowd. That broke two of guidelines I had set for myself: we were static and we were conspicuous.

(PHOTOS: Mohamed Morsy Declared Egypt's First Islamist President)

Another tiny but crucial contributing factor was the car bombing in Lebanon earlier that day. Understandably, this topped the news and pushed our report further into the evening—which meant Sonia really had to stand under the lights. By the time she started her French-language report, we were hemmed in on all sides and the crowd was starting to act obnoxious. I was one foot away from Sonia, carrying both of our bags and pleading with them to let her work without distraction. The mood wasn't angry or malevolent—just rowdy. I remember that standing right next to me was a veiled Egyptian mother in her 30s holding the hand of a boy who looked about three years old and was carrying a toy pistol.

As Sonia spoke, several good Samaritans in the crowd linked arms with me and each other to give Sonia some breathing room. A young production company employee named Ali was also there trying to calm things down.

By the time my instincts started to kick in that I didn't like the way things were going, it was far too late. Just before Sonia was supposed to start speaking, I leaned in and told her not to wait around for me to finish my live-shot. She was to take both our bags and head straight to the nearby Hardees fast food restaurant. When she finished I handed her the bags and told Ali, "Take Sonia straight to the Hardees. Take her personally right now."

That's when everything flipped. The crowd surged in with Sonia at the center. I dropped my microphone and grabbed her in a face-to-face bear hug for protection.

It was as if everyone had suddenly gone insane. We were at the center of a storm of bodies as I held on to Sonia and physically pushed through the crowds. She was understandably scared and crying a little and the only thing I could tell her was to keep breathing, keep looking at me and everything would be all right.

We moved in a lurching sort of crab-walk at the center of the maelstrom. Bodies and anonymous hands were pressing in from all sides. Several of the men were absolutely trying to molest Sonia and remove her clothes. However, even now, in retrospect, she is reluctant to characterize what happened as a "sexual assault" and I agree with her.


Still, it was definitely mass harassment and definitely dangerous. But it was almost more of a kind of hysteria, a "madness of crowds" situation than a coordinated sexual attack such as happened to CBS correspondent Lara Logan in Tahrir on the day Hosni Mubarak resigned. I do believe, however, that something along those lines might have happened to Sonia if I'd lost her in the crowd. This was a group of hyper, borderline-feral men – both gropers and thieves taking advantage of the chaos.

(MORE: Cairo's Many Shades of Protests: What They Reveal About How the New Egypt Operates)

In a moment of dark comedy that we would laugh about later, my jeans at one point fell down around my ankles and I struggled to pull them up with one hand while keeping my hold on Sonia. The priority was to keep her on her

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feet and make sure I never lost my grip.

It was honestly hard to tell in several cases just who was trying to grope Sonia and who was trying to help us. But there were at least five young guys in the crowd who actively helped me protect Sonia—and without them we never would have made into the Hardees.

Depressingly, the employees at the fast food restaurant had obviously had some practice giving emergency shelter to women fleeing rowdy Tahrir mobs. They reacted immediately, pulling down the metal gate. For a while we were trapped in there as Sonia struggled to compose herself and we waited for the mob to disperse. She was traumatized and angry but not physically hurt. We both knew it could have been a lot worse. At one point I slipped out and made a hopeless attempt to find our bags, but of course they were long gone. Finally I hailed a cab and asked the driver to wait at the curb. The crowds outside had thinned and we made a quick getaway into the cab, but the sight of Sonia set off a roar and a couple young hooligans started pounding on the hood as the driver made a fast getaway.

The most amazingly thing about the whole experience was how quickly it took place. Sonia probably finished her stand-up at around 10:40. When we made it into the taxi and left Tahrir, we were stunned by the dashboard clock: it was 11:07. The entire pre-Hardees mob scene must have taken about 5 minutes.

I probably shouldn't be shocked by what happened to Sonia and me but naively I suppose I still am. Sexual harassment and incidents like this are one of the modern plagues of Egypt. It's not an Arab thing or a Muslim thing; it's a very specific Egyptian thing that has been building for years and it could take decades to unravel. There's a common misconception that the revolution unleashed this sort of behavior in Egyptian men, but that's simply not true. It happened under Mubarak as well; in one notorious case, a gang of wild youth rampaged through downtown on a holiday weekend targeting any woman they saw. And that's not even mentioning the kind of everyday predatory sleaziness that women—both foreign and Egyptian—have to fend off everyday. But Tahrir has become the focal point for this new spike in mob attacks on women partially because that is where the crowds and the foreign journalists converge. Months of back-and-forth political upheaval have turned it into some sort of consequence-free zone in many men's minds.

(MORE: [Egypt's Young Revolutionaries Have Lost Their Way](#))

Several months ago, I interviewed Heba Morayef of Human Rights Watch's Egypt office on why this was going on in Tahrir Square. She said that everyday harassment was a long-time issue but these mob assaults were a disturbing new trend. "The attackers know they're unlikely to be prosecuted because sexual harassment is not taken seriously," by society or the authorities," Morayef told me. "And they know that Tahrir is a space where military and police do not want to enter."

These sort of Tahrir mob scenes have happened so frequently that the phenomenon has taken on a horrible business-as-usual familiarity. The Hardees employees told me that this was hardly the first time a terrified woman had sought shelter from the mob there. I'll confess that when Natasha Smith, a young British woman, was attacked in June, it barely registered with me.

I love Tahrir Square. I'm genuinely nostalgic for the way that place felt during the revolution. In the book I wrote about the Egyptian revolution, I spoke of Tahrir like it was a living character just as vital and dynamic as any of the revolutionaries I interviewed.

Here's an example from the prologue: "Immediately Tahrir became the epicenter of a revolution. Protestors not only transformed it, they were themselves transformed by their presence in it. Tahrir became a revolutionary organism unto itself, bigger than any one citizen or political faction—and most important, bigger than (Hosni) Mubarak and his government."

Now I'm walking around angry. I don't know if I'll ever feel the same way about Tahrir Square again. That place meant something powerful and inspirational; for a brief window it embodied the best of the beleaguered Egyptian spirit. Tahrir was the heart of the external revolution against Mubarak's government, but there's an internal revolution in public behavior and social decency that desperately needs to happen and that still hasn't even started.

I feel like over the past 18 months, on multiple levels, we have let Tahrir Square down.

Ashraf Khalil is a Cairo-based journalist and author of Liberation Square: Inside the Egyptian Revolution and the Rebirth of a Nation

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