RESEARCHING HOPE AND FAILED EXPECTATIONS
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In *Women and the Egyptian Revolution: Engagement and Activism during the 2011 Arab Uprisings*, I offered an oral history of women's engagement in the January 25th uprising that led to the ousting of former Egyptian president Ḥusnī Mubārak.[1] Thinking now about my book, remembering my fieldwork, and reflecting on the present turn of events in Egypt, I was quickly overwhelmed by feelings of futility. Futility is an all too common feeling, present whenever I think or write about the experiences of women in the 2011 episode of contention. The uprising, a then seemingly decisive juncture in Egypt's political history, ended with the consolidation of authoritarianism and the persecution of activists, including independent feminists.

Scholars and researchers in Middle Eastern studies have explained the ways in which carrying out research in a politically sensitive context and amid an evolving political landscape raise important ethical demands and ongoing moral dilemmas.[2] Building upon my experience conducting research during and following the uprising in Egypt, I highlight how this evolving political landscape had important implications on the research process and knowledge production. The experience of failed expectations and the consolidation of authoritarianism left me asking fundamental questions about not only the nature of uprisings, but also how to research these episodes of contention and convey activists' experiences of hope and failed expectations. These questions are at the heart of my research on women's engagement in political struggles and collective action and have broad relevance across the field.

CHALLENGES OF CONDUCTING FIELDWORK
While conducting my fieldwork in 2014, I observed the revival of the security state, the rise of hyper-nationalism among citizens, and the narrowing—and eventually the closing—of the political landscape. Following the election of President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi in June 2014, the Egyptian regime actively disseminated a discourse of fear, constantly warning citizens against a conspiracy to bring down Egypt. For some interviewees, "talking politics"[3] had become a painful exercise. Politics, as one of my interviewees astutely described, had been given "a bad name."[4]

The politicization of everyday life in Egypt and the media's treatment of "politics as entertainment"[5] contributed to the loss of momentum and to the spread of political exhaustion. Notwithstanding this aura of fear and disappointment, other interviewees were still willing to participate and share their views. I, however, found myself reluctant to ask politically sensitive questions. In such a context, self-censoring marks not only participants' responses but also the researcher's questions. I found myself steering the discussion away from what might be perceived as a red line. Red lines in a dynamically repressive regime are often blurry, as surveillance and control are carried out by not only state agents but also non-state

actors.[6] Beyond presenting a threat to the interviewees and the researchers, control and surveillance effectively limit access to the voices of activists on the ground. These obstacles have implications for the validity of our research and authenticity of our analysis.

Besides self-censoring, this constricted political landscape influences and shapes how the researcher is perceived among participants and interviewees. I often wondered how my identity as an Egyptian female studying in North America—thus an outsider often perceived as among those benefiting from the emerging "academic tourism"[7] in the region—had an impact on my interviewees' responses.[8] The effect of this insider-outsider identity came to the forefront during my interview with a state official in 2014, following the election of al-Sisi. In my interview with a director at a national institution for women's rights, the director denied that sexual harassment was a problem in Egypt. She insisted that the number of incidents were insignificant and blamed women who dressed liberally, or who were, like me, "young and present in the public space." I am still not sure how to situate her answer, but during the interview I could not but feel that, notwithstanding my Egyptian origin, my status as a researcher studying in the West positioned me as an outsider. Thus, the director might have felt that it was her duty to conceal and deny the phenomenon in the presence of a "perceived outsider" like myself.

REPRESENTING ACTIVISTS' VOICES

During my fieldwork, I also recognized with disappointment the sense of despair growing among intellectuals and activists. When I had carried out my first round of interviews in Egypt in 2012, the atmosphere was marked by cautious optimism, hope, and a belief in a better future. This positive aura, however, was short-lived and soon came to an end with the resurgence of gender inequality, the rise of gender-based violence, and the failure of democratic transition in Egypt. Themes of despair and disappointment became fundamental features of my interviews in 2014 and more intensely in 2017, as female participants reflected on their experiences and their expectations for change following the uprising. However, whenever I asked if that was it, if that was the end of change and reform, they hastily asserted: "Not yet." Activists often claimed that the experience of collective action has changed them and that "things" cannot return to the "old days."[9] However, in many ways, "things" now seem far worse than the "old days," leaving the question of what really changed unanswered.

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What really changed is an important question to ask and a significant one to answer. It reclaims the voices of activists and contributes to explaining the challenges and opportunities that developed after the uprising. Answering this question, however, presents the researcher with a number of challenges and demands. The political and personal narratives conveyed by activists carry a deep emotional attachment to the euphoria of the January 25th Uprising in Egypt and have an unmistakable emotional weight. Regardless of the subjectivity of some of these narratives, researchers have a responsibility to document these accounts and experiences. Recollection, as Haruki Murakami describes in his novel, *Kafka on the Shore*, is "the only proof that I have lived."[10] Researchers, thus, have a responsibility to not only document the narratives but position the content and tone of these narratives within the broader map of hope and failed expectation. In so doing, we are able to maintain the robustness of our empirical data, the authenticity of our analysis, and the relevancy of our research despite hostile authoritarian settings and disappointing political landscapes.

[1] Nermin Allam, *Women and the Egyptian Revolution: Engagement and Activism during the 2011 Arab Uprisings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

[2] For a discussion of the challenges of carrying research in the Middle East and North Africa, see Lihi Ben Shitrit, "Intersectionality Theory and Working with 'Both Sides,'" in *Political Science Research in the Middle East and North Africa: Methodological and Ethical Challenges*, ed. Janine A. Clark and Francesco Cavatorta (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 254–63; Sarah E. Parkinson, "Seeing Beyond the Spectacle: Research on and Adjacent to Violence," in *Political Science Research in the Middle East and North Africa: Methodological and Ethical Challenges*, ed. Janine A. Clark and Francesco Cavatorta (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 73–82; Jillian Schwedler and Janine A. Clark, "Encountering the Mukhabarat State," in *Political Science Research in the Middle East and North Africa: Methodological and Ethical Challenges*, ed. Janine A. Clark and Francesco Cavatorta (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 23–34; Atef Said, "Doing Research during Times of Revolution and Counter-Revolution," in *Political Science Research in the Middle East and North Africa: Methodological and Ethical Challenges*, ed. Janine A. Clark and Francesco Cavatorta (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 83–93; Irene Weipert-Fenner, "Blurred Lines of Inclusion and Exclusion: Research Ethics for Sympathizers," in *Political Science Research in the Middle East and North Africa: Methodological and Ethical Challenges*, ed. Janine A. Clark and Francesco Cavatorta (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 233–41.

[3] Interviewee 108. Author's interview, Cairo, Egypt, March 2017.

[4] Interviewee 108. Author's interview, Cairo, Egypt, March 2017.

[5] Interviewee 115. Author's interview, Cairo, Egypt, March 2017.

[6] For a discussion on the impact of surveillance and control on the research process, see Schwedler and Clark, "Encountering the Mukhabarat State"; Stefan Malthaner, "Field Work in the Context of Violent Conflict and Authoritarian Regimes," in *Methodological Practices in Social Movement Research*, ed. Donatella Della Porta, First edition. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 173–94.

[7] Academic tourism is a concept that emerged during a discussion at the workshop "The Ethics of Political Science Research and Teaching in MENA," held on June 9 - 11, 2015, at King Mohammed V University in Rabat. Among the key themes that emerged during the discussion were the ways in which some locally based scholars and state officials view many researchers from outside the region as academic tourists because they produce knowledge for Western rather than local audience and have better access and funding opportunities than locally based scholars.

[8] See also Said, "Doing Research during Times of Revolution and Counter-Revolution," for a discussion of the insider-outsider status of the researcher and its impact on the research process.

[9] Interview with female activist 95, author's interview, Cairo: Egypt, November 2015.

[10] Haruki Murakami, *Kafka on the Shore*, Reprint edition (New York: Vintage, [2002] 2006).