





Social Media and the Arab Spring: How Facebook, Twitter, and Camera Phones Changed the Egyptian Army's Response to Revolution

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How should militaries think about social media as a factor in military operations? In this study I examine recent Arab Spring scholarship, with a particular focus on the significant impact of social media on events in Egypt in early 2011. Existing literature in this area centers on the ability of various social media platforms to unite and inspire population masses, yet does not address the important effect of social media on military forces responding to the revolution. This gap is exemplified by the general reluctance of military practitioners to engage scholars with actual evidence from real-world events during times of conflict. In response to these challenges, I offer the unique oral history of an Egyptian company commander who led soldiers in Cairo's Tahrir Square throughout several months of intensive security operations during the Arab Spring. Through this descriptive study, I find that the prevalence of social media considerably affected the Egyptian Army's response to the massive popular uprising. To evaluate these findings, I propose a "social media update" to Gene Sharp's mechanisms of nonviolent change, analyzing the Egyptian Army's counter intuitive approach to the events of 2011 in light of an updated Sharp framework. I conclude that the Egyptian Army's experiences provide a tremendously useful example of how militaries may think about social media as a factor in military operations. Finally, I argue that a written account of the Egyptian Army's response to social media is exactly the type of "policy-relevant scholarship" military practitioners must be willing to produce in order to inform U.S. policy in a truly meaningful way.

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