# A Geography of Revolt in Alexandria, Egypt's Second Capital

**Youssef El Chazli**

*How does the layout of a city affect how protest unfolds? How does urban space constrain and enable the choices protesters have both physically and symbolically? How does protest differ from one city to another? Youssef El Chazli takes us inside Alexandria's revolt in January 2011 and contrasts it to the better-known story of the anti-Mubarak uprising of 25 January 2011 in Cairo, showing us the ways in which the protest in Egypt's "second capital" ballooned because of the geographically transgressive choices of its protesters.*

Tuesday, January 25, 2011. A protest, launched by a tiny group of activists in Alexandria's eastern district, is starting to gather more participants. As the demonstration grows bigger, the activists try to keep control over the excited crowd. Sameh[1] is sitting on the shoulders of a fellow activist, wearing an Egyptian flag as a cape. Shouting as loudly as possible, he tries to give guidelines to the protesters, "Any one of you who passes by a car, do not hit it, do not stand on it, do not damage any property, we are good people (*nāss muhtaramīn*)… [Protesters cheer, applaud and wave their little flags] (…) Long live Egypt! [The crowd repeats]." The small crowd is now walking through the maze that is the Abū Kharrūf neighborhood, and more people are joining in. An officer approaches the obvious leaders of the march, and tells them, "Don't leave here, stay [in the alleyways], it's just for your safety." Yet the activist recalls distinctly, "He told us [that], but obviously, it wasn't about our safety… He didn't know how to deal with us… The numbers were too big. That's why he was so polite."

Nevertheless, at that point, the activists still felt that their numbers were not enough, so they complied, and went back around the neighborhood, aggregating even more people as they went. The protest was now getting really big. "We felt that he [the officer] was scared, as if a hundred thousand questions were racing through his head: 'Where did all these people come from? What are we going to do with them?'" Mohamed recalls. This time, though, when the officer tried again to convince them to stay "inside," and not spill out on the main street, they did not comply. They were exhilarated by their numbers and by the trembling walls under their mighty chants. Sameh simply waived in disdain to the astonished officer, and continued straight on.

"We were now on the main street. When that happened, we saw the numbers for the first time… We couldn't see clearly before that, as we were in narrow alleys. The numbers were huge. Spontaneously, we found ourselves in tears from the sight." In these few minutes, the activists operated a first redefinition of the situation: "As we started walking, we felt that… it's not a revolution, but it's the beginning of the downfall of the regime… it's the beginning of asking for our rights, having our demands met."

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[1]   All names have been changed.

**Why a geography of revolt?**

Were we to reduce an uprising to its causes, there would be no particular need to investigate the relationship between space and protest. We would only have to look at broad causal mechanisms – for instance, "frustration", itself a consequence of "unemployment," "corruption," "lack of freedom," and so on. Yet, if we look at uprisings as dynamic events and consider how localized street protests succeed in attracting people, developing and eventually mutating into mass mobilizations, then it becomes relevant to study the peculiarities of each local case. I argue here, following many others, that space matters, and that the geography, topography, and urban planning of a city directly affect the nature of (street) protest. Far more than being just the theater or the background of action, space materially frames interactions, gives them meaning, provides players (protesters and the police) with opportunities, and imposes constraints on them. I will illustrate some of these ideas with fieldwork data drawn from research I conducted in Egypt's second city, Alexandria, since the beginning of what came to be known as the January 25 Revolution.

By the end of the 2000s, Egyptian activists had acquired a deep-rooted, practical sense of spatial constraints. They knew that choosing a protest site had several consequences. Depending on the location, the protest's attractiveness to outsiders would vary; the manageability of the protest by police forces would be more or less easy; and the protest itself, depending on its morphology, would seem more or less important. Marching down narrow streets doesn't feel or mean the same as demonstrating along broad avenues. The choice of starting points for the January 25, 2011 protests was the subject of intense debate among activists. Some wanted to stick to the usual spots in downtown Cairo, while others suggested departing from working-class neighborhoods in the city's outskirts. (El Chazli 2012, pp. 85–88) They eventually chose to organize marches that would end on Tahrir Square, instead of calling for the usual sit-ins in front of the Journalists' Syndicate or the High Court (Deboulet and Florin 2014).[2] The way in which the first protests were organized no doubt played an important role in their success.


**Alexandria is not Cairo**

Most analyses of the Egyptian revolution focus on Cairo (El Chazli 2015). But if we take the spatial parameters of each protest site into account, we can see whether different landscapes and geographies play a role in other cities. Alexandria, for instance, has a very peculiar geography: "The constraints of the site give it a unique form, as the agglomeration follows the coastline for 40 kilometers, while its width, on average, is less than 4,000 meters." (Denis 1997, p. 2). These geographical peculiarities gave the revolutionary mobilizations in Alexandria a rather different morphology than its Cairene counterparts. Whereas marches in Cairo were usually planned to start from a multitude of points around Tahrir Square and then converge and end on the square with a sit-in (*I'tissām*), there was a preference in Alexandria for marches without end points that would instead fill and circle around the main arteries of the city. When Alexandrians tried to replicate the Cairene model by initiating a sit-in at different spots in the city (for instance, on Mahatit Masr Square, in front of the railway station), they quickly realized that it wouldn't work *because* of these geographical peculiarities: no square was as big, central, and equidistant from all the protest sites as Tahrir Square was in Cairo. It became common knowledge among activists that "sit-ins fail in Alexandria" (see Figures 1a and 1b).

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[2]   For other very interesting analyses of the January 25 uprising in relation with spatial dynamics, see: AlSayyad (2012); Said (2014, 2015).

**Figure 1a. Protest starting points and clash points, Alexandria, January 25, 2011**
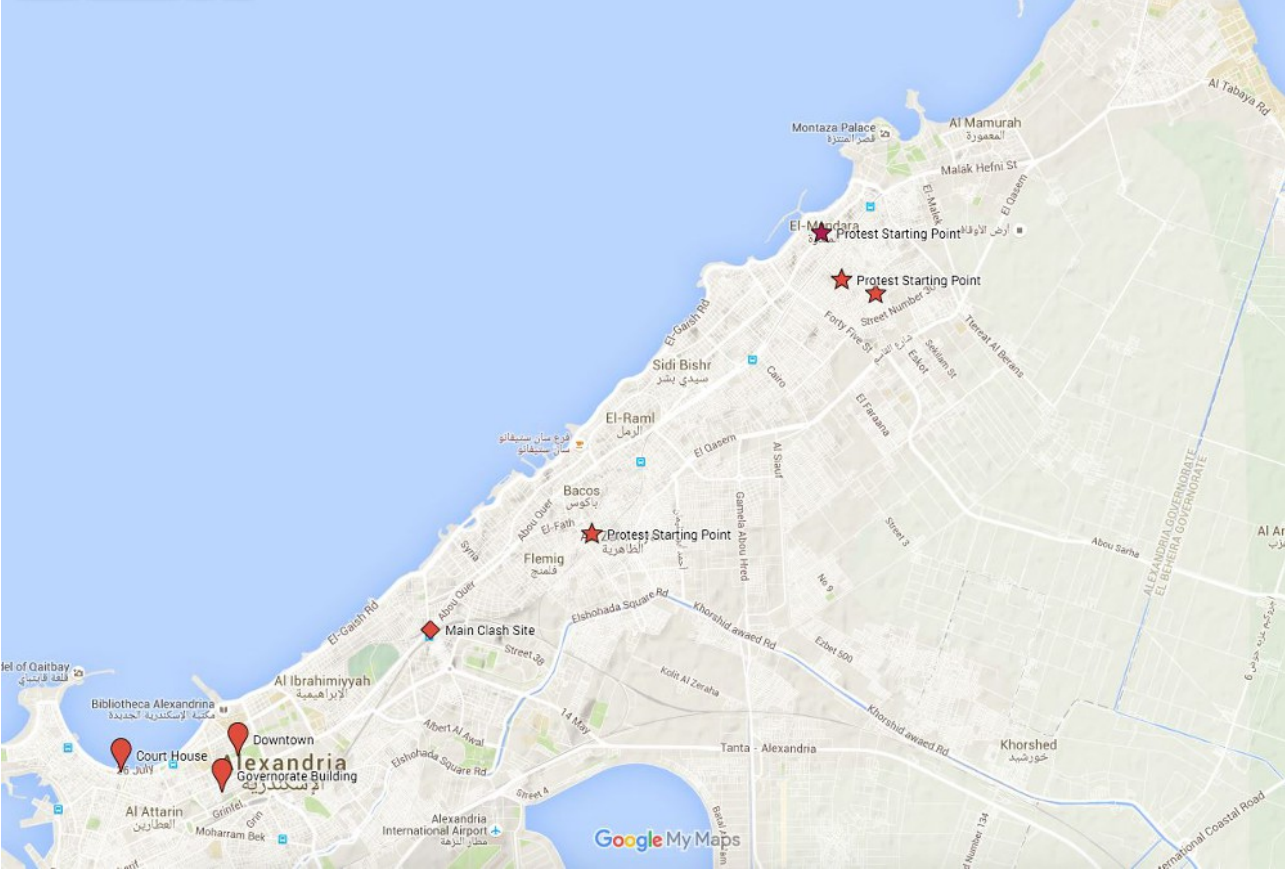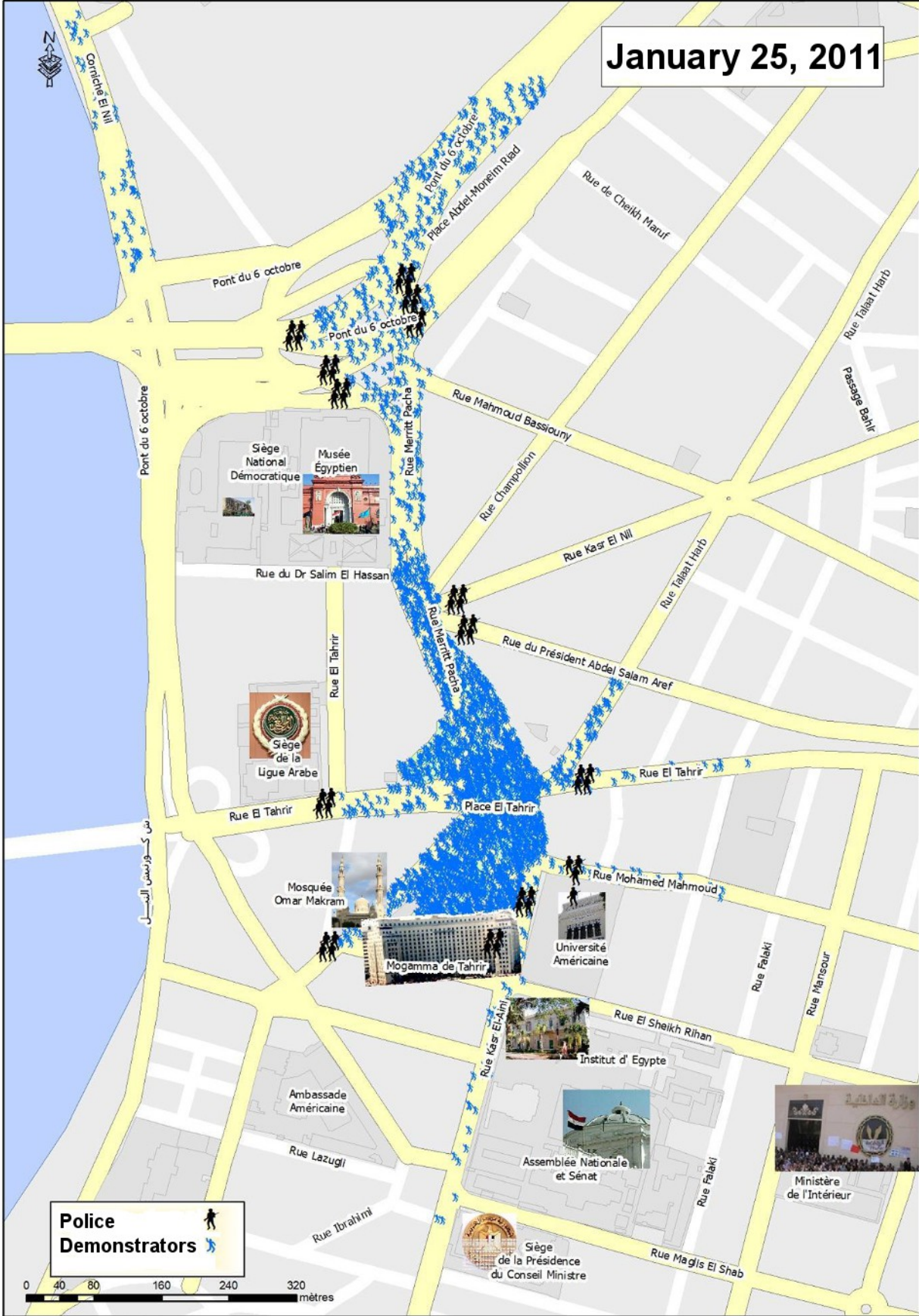
**Figure 1b. Protests in Cairo, January 25, 2011**



January 25, 2011

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As in Cairo, the first marches in Alexandria were set to start from different neighborhoods, mainly from the eastern districts, home to many informal settlements and lower-income residents (Figure 2). As in many parts of Egypt, these informal neighborhoods in Alexandria are rarely shanty towns or *bidonvilles*. They usually consist of mid-rise concrete buildings organized along a maze of narrow streets and alleyways (*harāt*) that make such neighborhoods particularly difficult for the police to control.

**Figure 2. Protest in Eastern Alexandria, Photo by Hossam Fouad**



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On January 25, 2011, Central Security Forces (the riot police) were positioned on the main streets that form the skeleton of these labyrinths of alleyways. The leaders of the demonstrations decided to leave the narrower *harāt* and engage in the main streets. This was no easy decision. Activism in Alexandria, and in Egypt more generally, had been shaped in the years leading up to the revolution by a subtle relationship between protesters and the police, which Frédéric Vairel (2008) describes as "going far enough but never too far."[3] Crossing a red line, breaking one of these tacitly negotiated boundaries, such as deciding to lead the demonstration on to a main avenue, could result in violent repression.

As a consequence of these tactics deployed on January 25, namely initiating protests on the outskirts rather than in the center, police forces were overwhelmed; they were deployed in relatively small groups around the city, making it harder to contain crowd movements. By bringing protest closer to people's homes and turning neighborhoods into battlefields, these tactics also changed the nature of the fight itself. Salwa Ismail notes that "[r]aids tend to be carried out on the main

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[3]  The translation fails to capture the paradox apparent in French: "*Jusqu'où ne pas aller trop loin ?*" (literally: "To what extent can we not go too far?").

thoroughfares rather than in the alleys. This explains, in part, why many alleyways have their own coffee shops and are attracting neighborhood clientele. It should be recalled that alley life has its code of sociability that outsiders must respect in order to be admitted. This makes police entry into the alley an intrusion into a collectively guarded space" (Ismail 2006, pp. 156–157). By contrast, a protest in front of the High Court would be strictly political and inhibit many people from participating, turning neighborhoods into battlegrounds attracting many youths into the movement (El Chazli 2012).

**Space and protester–police relations**

Alexandria's peculiar geography also resonated with the particular pattern of relations between protesters and the police. During the decade leading up to the revolution, these relations had revolved around a set of practical and tactical problems. As one activist pointed out during an interview, most protest activities (*faʿāliyyāt*) did not have a planned ending. Activities would end if the police so decided, either negotiating with the protesters and asking them to leave, or repressing the gathering. A consequence of these normalized relations with the police was an intense feeling of uncertainty and, when the security agencies did not intervene as strongly, the inability to decide what to do next. On January 25, 2011, because a particular spatial configuration hindered repression, a totally new situation emerged, creating new opportunities and imposing new constraints on the various players. Moreover, the issue of deciding how activists should end their marches had another facet. In the absence of a central square or important governmental buildings, where should they direct their protest? This became particularly visible after January 28, when most police stations and the governorate building downtown were set on fire; activists were confused as to where they should direct protest. Indeed, if a revolution is directed towards the state, how do you revolt when state symbols are invisible, unlike in the capital city?

I have tried, in this article, to highlight very briefly how specific spatial arrangements linked to the geography, topography or urban planning of a city can have great consequences on the way protests emerge and develop. These are only suggestions following interesting studies concerning other Middle Eastern cases.[4] However, this paper also seeks to show that we should take local stakes in protest episodes very seriously, and not rely solely on macroscopic explanations of social unrest.

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[4] See, for instance: Ismail 2006; Menoret 2014; Schwedler 2012.

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