Student activism in post-2011 Egypt: understanding a contentious arena in a fluctuating context

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Beyond the nationalist legacy of student activism: constructing an alternative approach

Studies of contentious student activism in Egypt are, thus far, burdened by the legacy of the nationalist movement. Most scholars highlight the historicity of students' contentious movements, referring to their active role in the struggle for national independence; moreover, the construction of the first university in Egypt was in itself a national project[1]. Due to this legacy, students are perceived in the academic literature as one of the main actors of resistance against post-colonial regimes' authoritarian turn. Consequently, they became one of the main targets of their repression.[2] In addition, universities were considered as privileged spaces of protests, venues for political socialization[3], as well as the starting point of political careers.[4]

In more recent work, scholars demonstrate that Mubarak's regime gradually neutralized contentious activism within universities. Using tools such as repression, close control of university leadership, restrictive legislative framework, he succeeded in removing politics from

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[1] Raouf Abbas et al., *Al jame'a al Masreya wal Mujtama: 100 'am min al nidal (Egyptian University and society: 100 years of struggle)*,the working group for university independence (March 9th) , Cairo, 2008

[2] Ahmed Abdalla, *The Student Movement and National Politics in Egypt, 1923-1973* (Al Saqi Books, 1985). Jordi Tejel Gorgas, "The Limits of the State: Student Protest in Egypt, Iraq and Turkey, 1948-63," *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 40, no. 4 (October 1, 2013): 359.

[3] Iman Farag, "Quand L''education Forme La Jeunesse': La Construction D'une Categorie En Egypte," in *Jeunesses Des Sociétés Arabes. Par-Delà Les Menaces et Les Promesses*, ed. Iman Farag and Mounia BENNANI-CHRAÏBI (Cedej/Aux lieux d'être, 2007); Vincent Geisser, Karam Karam, and Frederic Vairel, "« Espaces Du Politique. Mobilisations et Protestations »," in *La Politique Dans Le Monde Arabe*, ed. Elisabeth Picard, Collection U. (Armand Collin, 2006).

[4] Dina El Khawaga, "La génération seventies en Égypte. La société civile comme répertoire d'action alternatif," in *Resistance et protestation dans les societes musulmanes*, ed. Mounia Bennani-Chraïbi and Olivier Filleule (presses de Sc Po, 2003), 271–92; Aliaa Saraya, *Des engagés pour la cause des droits de l'homme en Egypte* (Paris: Harmattan, 2009).

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(university) campus[5]. Others highlight that the changes in the higher education system, within the larger project of the neo-liberalization of the economy, moved students further away from their national political role. [6] With the exception of a few protests, all attempts to mobilize students failed[7]. The remaining activists migrated to other spaces such as the blogosphere or the newly created political movements.[8]

There is a main premise underlying most of the existing work on student activism in Egypt, one that revolves around the so-called Student Movement. It stipulates that students supposedly represent an "avant-garde" to the population, they ought to participate -or lead- contentious mobilizations for demands related to the nation. The non-fulfillment of this historical role, thus, reveals the problematic process of "*depolitisation*" of the university.

In this paper, we aim to move beyond the "Student Movement", to deconstruct the approach to student activists as one single actor that fulfills a national role or fails to do so. We will present an alternative view, one that, as we will demonstrate, is more suitable in situating students' contention in the fluctuating political context since 2011.

We start this section by introducing our field study, then we will present some selected examples of the data in order to elaborate our alternative approach and situate it theoretically.

This study is based on twenty interviews and informal discussions with members of different contentious student organizations currently operating in Cairo, *Ain Shams, Helwan, Alexandria, Tanta and Zaggazig* universities. We held these interviews between May and November of 2014.[9]

In addition, between September 2014 and June 2015[10], we participated in many coordination meetings, demonstrations, outings and press conferences where we got the opportunity to observe the interactions between different actors. The most important observation experience was a five day camp organized by the Association of freedom of thought and expression

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(AFTE)[11] for the members of various student organizations that we were allowed to attend and observe. We accompanied these students during sessions and group discussions, but also during some aspects of their daily lives. This helped us glean a lot of useful information about the current situation.

The people we interviewed and observed were current and former members or founders of a student organization (Mainly *Tullab Masr el Kaweya*, *Osret-el-midan*, *Tullab did el Inkilab* and Rev-Soc)[12]. Current members of these organizations are all students aged between 18 and 25; we could say that the "active cohort" is now in their third or final year of university. They can specifically be identified as the class that started their higher education in September 2011 after the uprising. Former members are older and finished their studies in Mubarak's final years. Most of the interviews were among students from public universities, but some were in the private sections of the faculties in these public universities[13].

November19th, 2011, slogans chanted during a demonstration against SCAF on Cairo University campus [14]

"Unite the front! Shoulder to shoulder! We are one Student Movement!"

"Wake up students! Understand your role! No matter how hard you study, the fruits of your labor will go to thieves!"

October 20th, 2013, Field notes, Cairo University campus,

As I was going out of Cairo University's central library around noon, in front of *Dar Ulum*, about three hundred students were chanting against the military regime. They were divided into two equal groups, men were separated from women. Most of the women were heavily veiled (*Khemar*) and were standing behind the men who were leading the chants, all were raising their hands or their flags with the *Raba'a* sign and were denouncing El-Sissi as a murderer and a traitor. Some of the men were painting on the floor the same slogans and signs, others had drums to accompany the chanting. A few minutes later, another (much smaller) group forms in the opposite direction, about fifty students of men and women standing together in a circle and chanting against the Muslim

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[11] AFTE is an Egyptian NGO advocating the right of free speech : it has a program for academic freedoms, AFTE also has a student monitor that publishes reports on violation of students' rights as well as other issues regarding student contentious activity

[12] A detailed description of each of these movements will be presented in the following sections of this paper

[13] Some faculties in public universities open private sections that provide the same curriculum but in a foreign language and with some extra privileges to its members , the fees for such private sections are more expensive than the public ones

[14] I participated in this demonstration as a student in Cairo university

brotherhood and raising slogans pro El-Sissi. As the two groups of demonstrators chanted, they started to move towards one another in a confrontational manner. Security agents in civil clothing came and stood between them. By then, the anti-El-Sissi group had started to move in order to circulate inside the campus, the security agents followed them, as I observed from a distance and noticed that the security agents were trying to identify the leaders of the demonstration. […]

May 1st, 2014, Interview with M.S a former general coordinator of *Osret-el-Medan* also a student of engineering in Ain shams University

F: what kind of activities has *Osret-el-midan* been doing recently? Do you sometimes organize trips or book clubs for the members?

M.S: Last month, we organized a trip, the money we made was not bad, you know these trips, workshops, fairs and similar activities help us stay alive and raise funds, but they are not part of our main mission. […]

September 16th, 2014 interview with A.K the president of the student union in the faculty of economics and political science

F: what are your plans for this year?

A.K.: Our current challenge is to transfer the experience of student activism that we accumulated during the last two years to the new generation of students. We entered the University in a revolutionary context; we were able to do whatever we wanted. But now, the university is not the same, students are encouraged to attend their classes and go straight home. How are they going to know that there are other things they can do here if we do not show them?

November 18th, 2014, Field notes

I found a Facebook event, stating that on November 18th, 2014, the recently formed *e'tilaf tullab Masr* (Coalition of the students of Egypt) was going to hold an exposition at noon in the faculty of commerce to commemorate the events of Mohammed Mahmoud[15]. I went to the appointed place at quarter past twelve, but there was nothing going on and no one present. I later learned that they usually announce a false timing and location to avoid security restrictions. The event was to be actually held at half past one at the stairs

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[15] Mohammed Mahmoud is a street in *Tahrir* square leading to the headquarters of the ministry of interior, this street witnessed violent clashes between police and protestors on November 18th 2011 resulting to the death of forty demonstrators.

near the faculty of science. I found a group of twenty students men and women from different student organizations, but mainly rev-Soc.[16]. There were pictures, posters and written slogans referring to the Mohammed Mahmoud events. As they stood in their place, they start chanting against the military regime. Five students made a skit to simulate the clashes between the police and demonstrators. A few minutes later they stopped chanting, I ask them why? They tell me that there is a demonstration by *"Students against the coup"*[17]coming by, I turned around to see a group of a few hundred students, a group of men followed by heavily veiled women also chanting against the military regime but this time they were raising the Raba'a sign. They passed by the stand-in and it seemed that any interaction between the demonstration and the stand-in was intentionally avoided. *"Students against the coup"* went on with their demonstration as the others resumed their chanting.

This specimen from the field work shows that, even though, the Student Movement is a term used frequently by current activists, the clear diversity in organizations, visions, goals, tools and discourses, make it hardly the most accurate term. The various transformations occurring in a relatively short time frame since 2011 go beyond the question of whether the students will be able to return to their historical national role.

Hence, in this paper we approach student activism as a tangled, dynamic **arena** of **individuals and organizations** whose **repertoires of contention** vary according to their visions, priorities and the context within which they operate. These actors' use of universities as spaces for collective action (both in the physical and symbolic sense) are distinct from one another, they are also subject to transformations through time.

In this study the term student activism refers to collective action organized by students "as such"[18], meaning the collective action based on their status as students.

 We focus on the contentious collective action, which is defined as "episodic, public, collective interaction among makers of claim and their objects when at least one government is a claimant,

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[16] Rev-soc is short for revolutionary socialists, which is the student wing of the Trotskist movement in Egypt
[17] The student movement created by the supporters of the destituted president Mohammed Morsy: the members are mainly MB members and sympathizers. For more details check section of this paper
[18] Philip Altbach, "The International Student Movement," *Journal of Contemporary History,* 5, no. 1 (1970): 159.

an object of claims or a party to claims and the claims would if realized affect the interests of at least one of the claimants". [19]

We wrote this paper during the field study, thus, it mostly constitutes descriptions and immediate reactions to empirical data. Nevertheless, it can be situated theoretically within the strategic interaction perspective (SIP). It takes into account the interactions between players (individuals and organization) involved in a social movement. These actors exist within "arenas" which is the term we use to approach student activism in Egypt, arenas can be defined as

> "A space both concrete (that is, from a dramaturgical perspective, the place and time of the staging of interactions) and symbolic (that is, from a rhetorical perspective) which brings together all the players, individual or complex, participating in the emergence, definition and resolution of a problem".[20]

Defenders of this approach highlight the importance of the "here and now" interactions, but also the necessity of situating these interactions within the context, structure and history. Our study mainly analyzes the "here and now" interactions between contentious student actors on two levels:

First, on the macro level, we will account for the timeline of students' contention since 2011 as it was reported by the activists we interviewed. We will demonstrate how between 2011 and 2014 there were many episodes of contention, each was shaped by distinct actors and mechanisms. In addition, we will present a preliminary typology of contentious student actors.

Secondly, we will highlight the transformations on the organizational/meso level by showing how one organization (*Osret-el-midan*) adapted to the fluctuations in the contexts. How the members of this organization frequently questioned its form and structure shifted their domains of actions and often revised their discourses.[21] It is important to note that, these two analytical levels cannot be studied separately; interactions on each level continuously affect the other. We aim to demonstrate that through the two sections of this paper.[22]

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[19] Doug MCADAM, Sidney TARROW et Charles TILLY, *Dynamics of Contention*, Cambridge university press, coll.« Cambridge Studies in Contentious Politics », 2001, p. 5.

[20] Olivier FILLEULE et Jan Willem DUYVENDAK, « Patterned Fluidity. An Interactionist Perspective as a Tool for Exploring Contentious Politics », *in* Jan Willem DUYVENDAK et James M. JASPER (éd.), *Players and Arenas: The Interactive Dynamics of Protest*, Amsterdam, Amsterdam University Press, p. 14-15.

[21] We will justify this choice in section 2 of this paper after introducing the organization in detail

[22] However our study does so only in one direction (from macro to meso) while knowing that the inter-level effects also happen in the other direction (individual careers to affect organizational structures and ultimately the social world) but we will not take that into account here. There is a third level of analysis that we do not approach in this paper which is the micro level , we believe that studying activists' individual careers as well as their socioeconomic background are important keys to understanding the transformations of a contentious arena However for now we will not address these careers ad leave them to further studies

Section1: Construction and transformations of the arena of contentious student activism

To study contentious movements, Ch. Tilly, S. Tarrow and D. Mcadam, propose to identify the mechanisms and processes constituting episodes of contention.[23] In this section, we will present five "episodes" of student contention, by describing the situations as they were accounted for by our interviewees, we will try to identify the actors involved as well as the main mechanisms characterizing each episode.[24]

My interviewees narrated these events from their own perspective and according to their involvement. Most of the elements we considered were accounted for in different interviews. Nevertheless, there are some highly controversial events that are narrated very differently according to the students' political positions. Since most of our interviewees are from the non-MB side of the contentious student arena, it should be noted that the opinions presented will not be a fully comprehensive version of events.

University under Mubarak

In the last few years, before the assassination of the late president Anwar El-Sadat in 1981, students were visible actors in various episodes of mobilization (especially those in 1972 and 1977). In reaction, El-Sadat applied new regulations in order to neutralize students as contentious actors. Consequently, Mubarak inherited a strictly controlled University[25] and made sure to keep these measures of control that were based on two foundations. Firstly, in terms of legislative framework, 'the law 49 for the year 1972 for the organization of universities' and its executive regulation maintained a strong dependence between the political regime and University administrations. The 1979 regulation ensured thorough control over all forms of student

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[23]"**Mechanisms** are a delimited class of events that alter relations among specified sets of elements in identical or closely similar ways over a variety of situations. **Processes** are regular sequences of such mechanisms that produce similar (generally more complex and contingent) transformations of those elements. **Episodes** are continuous streams of contention including collective claims making that bears on other parties' interests.

[24] Other accounts for the student activism in Egypt post-2011 by Mohammed ABDEL SALAM et Mohammed NAGY, *Student Movement from Mubarak's demission to Morsi's destitution*, Cairo, AFTE, 2014 ; AFTE, *Decline of the Brotherhood's Students, and Rise of new student forces*, Cairo, Association of freedom of thought and expression, 2013. And J. Dorio, « Pedagogy of transition: characteristics of university student activism in contemporary Egypt » (unpublished paper found on the author's account on www.Acadmia.edu). The first presents in details the variety of actors that appeared between 2011- 2013. However, they do show how these actors interacted with each other and the extent of their difference. The second mainly accounts for events of student contention between2011-2013 but does not highlight the variety of actors.

[25] We often use the term University with a capital U to refer to the physical and symbolic space of the arena contentious student activism. Although, it does need to be deconstructed to highlight the difference between Egyptian universities, this term (Al-Jam'a) is used frequently by literature with the same meaning; therefore we will use it for the time being.

activities, especially the Muslim Brotherhood students considered as the most potentially contentious. Administrations controlled not only the activities and budgets of the student unions, (the official bodies of student representation), but also the choice of representatives by favoring the NDP candidates (National Democratic Party: Mubarak's Party) and eliminating the candidates who did not explicitly support the regime.[26]

The second foundation of Mubarak's inherited order was *Haras el Gam'a* (University guards). Since 1981 a police unit was constantly present on University campuses in order to provide "campus security". Its mission however, was essentially to neutralize any threat of mobilization within the University.[27]

In this context, the only actors who were able to organize some sort of political activism were the Muslim Brotherhood (MB). Despite the restrictions imposed by *Haras el Gam'a* and the university's legal framework, MB students leveraged relatively less controlled spaces, such as the campus mosques to build networks amongst students. They also persevered in running as candidates for the student union elections in different faculties. In addition, they also provided practical services to students (photocopies, lecture notes, etc.) in order to maintain these networks.[28]

The MB weren't the only political group who managed to operate within universities, other groups such as the revolutionary-socialists (Rev-Soc.) managed to keep a low profile whilst organizing anti-regime expositions and recruiting new members to their organization. In the late 2000 the members of *Kefaya* and the April 6th movement also managed to organize some events, although these were limited both in time and in range.[29]

In sum, before 2011, in order to restrain contentious action, the regime kept the University under strict control with rules and regulations. Student organizations operated only in the limited space tolerated by the regime and were hence rarely able to mobilize. For example, between 2000 and 2002 different groups of students led demonstrations in support of the second *Intifada* and in 2003 against the war in Iraq. In 2006, the Muslim Brotherhood and the Rev-Soc jointly

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[26] Although many interviewees report similar incidents of elimination only one person I met has actually been eliminated from an electoral list (A.S)
[27] SHADY Abdel Aziz, « The problem of security in the university », *in* Kamal EL MENOUFY et Amany MASOUD (éd.), *University and citizenship in Egypt*, Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, 2007.
[28] Interview with A.B and A.G, medical students and members of *Osret-el-Midan* in Alexandria, May 7th 2014
[29] Interview O.A, one of the leaders of rev-soc students in Cairo University, May 10th 2014

organized a symbolic "shadow student union" to protest against the election process from which all the non-NDP candidates were eliminated.[30]

Finally, in 2010, the young supporters of Mohammed El-Baradei'[31]started to collect signatures from other students on petitions for change. Different groups of actors worked together in order to achieve exceptional moments of contention based on their common demands (the Palestinian cause, the rejection of the University guards and the independence of student unions, etc.).

March-June 2011: A falling order[32]

The uprising started on January 25th, 2011, during the mid-year vacation, the second semester of the academic year was postponed until March 2011. With the start of the new semester, it seemed that Mubarak's strict order in the universities was falling. The University guard left their posts, members of the previously elected student unions quit under pressure from active students and new unions were elected. Suddenly, the University was open to all sorts of collective action.

When the interviewees described this episode, most of them used the terms: "open door", "open space", "opening". They found themselves in a domain that was suddenly available to use as they saw fit. This period can be characterized by a general feeling of empowerment; student activists had the impression of having the upper hand vis-à-vis the administrations.[33]

Old activists reactivated their organizations and new ones were created[34]. Some advocated for the establishment of a new legislative framework for universities,[35] while others organized demonstrations against the University leadership affiliated with the NDP[36]. Other groups focused on demands related to conditions of life and studies.[37]

It is clear that student groups, both old and new, were still somewhat surprised by their new-found freedom. Given that each group had different priorities, they all reacted differently to this freedom, going in different directions with the demonstrations, sit-ins, petitions, expositions, and conferences that they organized.

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[30] Islam Hegazy, *Student Youth participation in Egyptian political life*, M.A in political science, Cairo University, Cairo, 2009

[31] For more details about Mohammed El-Baradei's return to Egyptian political scene see section 2 of this paper

[32]It is important to repeat the fact that most of my interviewees were NOT from the Muslim brotherhood –that is why these accounts reflect only one side of the story

[33] This idea was repeated in various terms during most of the interviews

[34] Interview with M.S, AFTE, November 4th 2014

[35] Interview with S.S. former member of the student union in the faculty of engineering Cairo university, May 9th 2014 and interview with M.B., AFTE, November5th 2014

[36] *Ibid.*

[37] Interview with M.B, former member and co-founder of *Osret-el-Midan* Cairo University, April 2014

September 2011 – June 2012: did the Student Movement return?

Most of our interviewees describe this moment as the return of the "real" student movement, their reference to the historical mobilization in the seventies and the forties was very clear in their description of this episode.[38] Given that students participated in the demonstrations against the Supreme Council of Armed forces (in power after the departure of Mubarak), they felt that the student activists were reclaiming their role as political "avant-garde". These demonstrations were carried out using "coordination structures" through which student unions and political movements organized their activities. Newly formed groups, constituted based on their domain of study (e.g. the movement of Cairo University engineers, the medicine students' movement, etc.) also joined. These structures were usually *ad-hoc* entities rarely lasting longer than the events for which they were created.

At the same time, the 2012 presidential elections were approaching, and although campaigning for a specific candidate was forbidden (according to the 1979 regulation and its amendment in 2007 that was still in effect), student members of presidential campaigns managed to promote their candidates on campus. After the end of the elections, members of these campaigns formed new student organizations such as *Masr-el-Kaweya* and *Osret-el-Midan.*

September 2012- June 2013: Towards an alternative order

In April 2012, a majority of Muslim brotherhood students was elected to the new student unions. Other political groups had boycotted these elections due to the fact that they were held according to the 1979 regulation that had remained unchanged.

These elections mark the concrete aspect of a process of separation between the Brotherhood students and the other political groups.[39] This process had begun earlier during the Mohammed Mahmoud demonstrations[40], and culminated in the formation of an implicit coalition against the Muslim Brotherhood.

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[38] Interview with A.K, president of the student union of FEPS, September 13th 2014
[39] For more details read the recap on this section: identifying different actors of students' contention
[40] During the events of Mohammed Mahmoud in November 2011, the Muslim brotherhood had just won the majority of the parliamentary seats, demonstrators from different political movements and parties demanded that the take an action in their favor against SCAF, nevertheless the parliament did not take any action and blamed the demonstrators for the situation. This was the beginning of the separation into two camps which was articulated clearly later on as the brotherhood reached the presidency

Unions dominated by the brotherhood elaborated a proposal for a new student regulation which allowed a wider range of action for the unions and empowered them vis-à-vis administrations. This regulation pertained particularly to matters of budgets and creation of new student organizations. The brotherhood students excluded the other groups such as Rev-Soc., *Masr-el-Kaweya* and *Osret-el-Midan* from the drafting of this proposal.[41] Later on, the Ministry of Higher Education adopted the project, declaring the new student regulation.

This marked the birth of a new order in the University. The brotherhood students were the most visible actor in this process; however, their exclusion of all other political groups was in no way as firm as the restrictions imposed previously under Mubarak. As evidenced by the fact that, the "other" groups also benefited from the open space and the freedom to occupy it according to their priorities. In April 2013, student union elections were held for the third time, the anti-brotherhood coalition won the majority.[42]

Later, due to a series of incidents demonstrating the deterioration of hygiene and security on campuses and in student housing (food poisoning, car accident on campus, etc.), this coalition mobilized against the Ministry of Higher Education, demanding reforms to protect the students on campus and in dorms.

In this episode, the players in the contentious arena were shuffled; the MB organizations moved from being makers of claim, to targets of contentious movements. Due to the establishment of a new order in the universities, contention became more contained[43] with the creation of new student organizations and ultimately with the elections of the mixed student unions in 2013.

2013/2014, early 2014: University as an alternative space for confrontation: gradual decline of student movements

Upon its arrival to power, the new military-backed regime (succeeding the destitution of President Mohammed Morsi in July 2013) has been in constant confrontation with all its contenders especially (and primarily) the Muslim Brotherhood.

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[41] Interview O.A, *Op.cit*
[42] AFTE, *Decline of the Brotherhood's Students, and Rise of New Student Forces*, *Op.cit*
[43] Mcadam, Tilly and Tarrow distinguish between contained and transgressive contentious politics. The first is the activity organized by pre-established institutional actors, while the second is led by newly self-acclaimed actors. In this episode, Contentious student activism took a more contained form with the creation of new student movements such as as *Masr-el-Kaweya* and *Osret-el-Midan.*

Since September 2013, the firm control of the public sphere has made the University a privileged space for such confrontation. For more than a year, student members of the Muslim Brotherhood and their sympathizers were leading mobilizations under the name "students against the coup" claiming the return of the removed president and the restoration of the rights of their deceased and arrested colleagues.

From that point on, repression in the University has been gradually increasing. At first, the target group was students against the coup, and then it expanded to all groups of student activists leading finally to the enforcement of a new strict order on all students and campuses. The repression has taken a very violent turn resulting in the death of 16 students on campus, the arrest of more than 3000 and the occurrence of many explosions.

Despite the repression, "Students against the coup" continued their mobilizations. They managed to occupy the totality of the collective action space in the University. The "other" groups' activities were limited to two areas: The first is advocacy for their arrested or deceased colleagues. Those groups created campaigns aiming to keep track of the arrested students, to demand the liberation, offer legal support and guarantee their rights (exams, visitations, defense, etc.). These campaigns also aim to find out the exact number of the arrested students and to publish records as a way to oppose "official" numbers disseminated through the national media.

Secondly, the remaining area of action was to mobilize students on sectorial demands related to their socioeconomic rights, the conditions of studies and life on campuses. This area was perceived as more likely to attract support from uninvolved students.

In many occurrences, these groups tried to coordinate their activities with "students against the coup" but the coordination failed given the difference in their demands and priorities. The need for alliance became more and more urgent, especially with increased repression. Non-brotherhood groups have formed together a coalition (*e'telaf tullab masr*) to coordinate their activity, but it did not continue for a long time because of the differences in their agendas.

By the beginning of the year 2014/2015, it was clear that the regime succeeded in removing all contentious activity from campuses. This was incarnated through the decisions from some university presidents to ban student organizations which declare political affiliation as well as the persistence of arrests and expulsion of all current and potential activist students. This restriction extended to general access to campus by hiring a private security company to secure the gates. In

addition to postponing the SU elections twice[44] as well as increasing control of all organized student activities even if they were not political.

Consequently, some tools of contentious politics became obsolete. It is now highly risky to hold demonstrations or sit-ins. Many organizations (non-MB) shifted their focus from explicitly contentious tools for activities with less confrontation with the regime and the university leadership. This shift includes new tools, such as discussion groups, campaigns, book clubs, etc.. Within the non-MB camp, many activists denounce this shift and regard it as a ruse from the regime to pull student activists away from their main mission.[45]This shift caused a greater separation between MB and non-MB students, the first denouncing the latter of indirectly supporting an oppressive regime by accepting to operate within the limits it imposes on them. Therefore, the MB students opted for a more violent approach to promote their cause, in 2014/2015 there were many incidents of attacks on university officials and campus security agents, these attacks resulted in more arrests for students.

Preliminary typology of players in the contentious arena

The previous review of the episodes of contention reveals the diversity of the players shaping this arena. In this sub-section, we will present a typology of organized contentious student actors starting from 2011[46]. We will only categorize them based on their origins and structure. There are other factors that can be included to further typologies such as the configuration of these actors in relation to one another and in relation to the regime in power, their visions, goals, and their political position. Those criteria are much more complicated to implement because configurations change, goals and visions adapt according to the possibilities of a fluctuating context. Therefore, we will present our preliminary typology knowing that it could be developed into a more complex process of construction of ideal-types of student activism in Egypt.

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[44] Elections were not held until November 2015 within a very restrictive legislative framework despite of which independent student managed to get to the ESU leadership. Until now the Ministry of Higher education refuses to validate the results of the elections on the level of ESU

[45] Informal discussion during a cross-movement coordination meeting, April 2015

[46] We exclude non-organized, non-continuous contentious activity such as demonstrations, sit-ins, we will only take them into account when they are used as tools by organizations as we will see in section 2 of this paper

Based on their structure we can identify the following categories of student entities[47]

o   Student unions: Until now, student unions are the only structures with an official claim of representation. They exist at three levels faculties, universities and one nationwide union (Egyptian student union ESU). Before 2013, only the first two levels were permitted. The readmitting of the ESU was one of the demands made by students in the first two episodes post-2011. Student unions can perform multiple roles (student representation, providing services, mobilizing students for community service, contentious mobilization). The hierarchy of these roles and the efficiency of their performance depend on the members of the union and their vision, in addition to the possibilities permitted by the legislative framework as well as the political context.

o   Student organizations affiliated with political organizations (such as the Muslim brotherhood, the Rev-Soc students and students of the April 6th movement): These are entities for which the university is one space of action among others. In other words, their status as students is not their main reference; most members operate as students but mainly as members of their organizations. This shows primarily in their political agenda, rhetoric as well as tools of contention.

o   Student organizations affiliated to political parties: Most new and old political parties have student sections. However, we need to distinguish between the degrees of their affiliation. Some organizations, *Osret-el-Midan* for example, are bureaus of the party, hence, the leadership of the student section is represented in the party's central command. While others, like *Masr-el-Kaweya* claim to be completely separate entities from the party, except that they maintain the same name and frequent transfers between the party and the student organization.. In both cases, affiliations are often revisited and negotiated (as we will see in the following section of this paper). Also, political parties differ from one another in their origins, financial means, and centrality of the students in the party's agenda as well as their distance from the regime in power.

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[47] As it may be clear, we only focus on contentious student entities thus we exclude all organizations that are in some way affiliated with the regime. Creating entities supported by the regime to mobilize students was

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o Independent student movements: These are entities whose agenda targets mainly student mobilizations for demands related to their status. They claim to be independent of other organizations operating outside the universities, such as the case of *Mokawma*[48] (resistance).

o *Ad hoc* coordination entities: Many different entities are created with the purpose of coordination between individuals, groups and organizations involved in an event such as a demonstration or a sit-in. Some aim for long-term coordination, but in most cases they failed to survive the event they were created for. As an example we can mention the coalition of the students of Egypt and the movement of Cairo engineering revolutionaries.

o Campaigns: campaigns are mostly tools for various contentious organizations to publicize a certain cause or person; nevertheless, some campaigns are formed by students independently from other organizations. This is the case of the campaigns demanding the freedom of the students arrested since 2013.

Through the previous section we identified the variety of contentious student actors and the continuous transformations of the arena post-2011. Hence, we proved that there is much more than one Student Movement. In fact, there is a dynamic, fluctuating, intersecting network of distinct actors whose configurations characterize the various episodes of contention and whose demands vary from one episode to another.

In the following section, we will move to a different analytical level, to study closely one contentious student organization and follow its transformations, to show how the fluctuating context affects the structure, tools and strategies of the actors.

Section 2: *Osret-el-Midan:* adjusting to ongoing transformations

There are many reasons why we chose to focus on *Osret-el-midan.* First, a practical reason, *Osret-el-midan* is one of the few contentious student organizations that are still operating on a national level. Along with *Masr-el-kaweya,* they are the most visible actors in the non-MB camp. Second, its transformations reflect those on the macro level. Studying *Osret-el-midan* reveals, on the meso level, the issues of the arena. Finally, *Osret-el-midan,* as we will demonstrate, represents a new form of youth politics. It shows, within the restrictive context, the ways through

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[48] Even though these movements claim to be independent and operate only within the university, there are many transfers between them and other organizations outside the university in the case of *Mokawma* it is closely related to the movement of youth for justice and freedom many

which young people, new to politics (nouveaux entrants), can operate through networking, informal activities and "implicit contention".

The constitution of *Osret-el-midan*: one network, multiple structures

Literally translated, the word *Osra* means family. In the context of student activism, the word means a student organization operating within the University. It can refer to a social, cultural or religious activity but here it refers to a political student organization.

Officially, *Osret-el-midan* was created in September 2012. However, the activity of some of its members can be traced back to 2010 with the return of Mohammed El-Baradei (a former director of the IAEA, Nobel prize winner) to Egypt announcing his possible candidacy for the presidential elections (scheduled in 2011), and leading a campaign for the reform of the Egyptian regime.

The national campaign for change gathered activists with various political affiliations and collected more than a million signatures. Many current members of *Osret-el-midan* started to get involved in politics by working with this campaign which expanded to a national level. There was not a specific section for students; therefore, action within the University remained diffused but rather random.

Bassem, one of the founders of *Osret-el-midan* and an ardent supporter of El-Baradei, recounts how he first became involved in politics

> Bassem: I worked on my own, without joining any organizations, I collected signatures on the petition for change and returned them to the bureau of El-Baradei's campaign in…..
>
> Farah: How did you come to know the campaign?
>
> B: through Internet and Facebook
>
> F: Does this mean that you were interested in following the political situation?
>
> B: yes, my interest started with El-Baradei's return, before that I didn't really follow
>
> F: And how did your family react? After all, it was not easy to be involved in politics at that time
>
> B: yes, my mother was so afraid. I did not keep her informed about my activities. I used to hide my campaign T-shirt (you know with the mustache and the glasses resembling El-Baradei's) under a T-ishirt or a scarf [….]

F: did that cause you problems with the university or with the security guards?

B: not really, I did not do much.....

F: noise?

B: exactly, I approached my colleagues and asked them to sign the petition; I am relatively well known in my class so people had confidence in me. Some of them accepted to sign others were scared, especially those who wanted to run for the student union elections. At that time, I coordinated some joint activities with colleagues who were members in the Muslim brotherhood

After the uprising, El-Baradei's supporters reactivated the networks of the campaign for change and started working to recruit new members. Some of them started campaigns and Facebook pages through which they got to join other supporters. For example Samer, one of the leaders in *Osret-el-midan* in Cairo University tells me the story of how he joined them

Samer: I had signed the petition for change in 2010, but frankly there wasn't much I could do before the uprising. Later in march 2011, I founded the first political ultras group, we called it *Ultras Barad'awi*[49]and we worked for a year

F: Why did you call it ultras?

S: The idea was to introduce a new type of political action. In order, to motivate youth to get involved in politics, you have to use their language. The idea was to collect support for El-Baradei using a Facebook group. It is through my work in this group that I came to know the founders of *Osret-el-midan* who later asked me to join them.

In the second half of 2011, El-Baradei announced his candidacy in the presidential elections upcoming in 2012. With that announcement, different local networks of his supporters merged together in order to form a central presidential campaign. The campaign had a section for universities, and despite the fact that the regulation forbade political campaigning on campus, students managed to mobilize support for their candidate. Bassem explains:

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[49] Meaning El-Baradei's Ultras : Ultras being the name of the leagues of football club supporters the term is used however to refer to radical support and commitment to a cause, a person or a group

The campaign started by collecting data about volunteers and making groups of people who are in the same universities. I then started contacting the people in Cairo University and we started to work

F: on campus?

B: yes

F: but if I remember correctly political campaigns were forbidden at that time

B: yes, but we did it anyways

F: how?

B: well in my case, I asked the administration if we could organize a series of conferences about presidential candidates. They accepted, but eventually we only did El-Baradei's, but it did not work everywhere, in some faculties some of the campaign's activities were prohibited.

Few months through the campaign, El-Baradei announced his withdrawal from the elections. This decision surprised and disappointed many of his supporters, especially students who, in order to maintain their network active, created a campaign of information called haqqena (our right) to learn about the new constitutional proposal that was being drafted.

In April 2012, when it became clear that the Muslim Brotherhood will eventually access the main positions in the post-Mubarak regime, El-Baradei created a new political party, El-Dustur, (the constitution) to unify the brotherhood's political opponents. El-Dustur's younger members created a bureau for students, Tullab Hezb El-Dustur which became later Osret-el-midan. According to the founders of el-Osra, this formula is more adapted to the student "language" meaning that students are more likely to join a student activity than a political party. Osret-el-midan's structure was composed of a central bureau elected by the members; there are also bureaus at the level of every University and every faculty. This structure facilitated coordination among multiple levels.

The transformation from the party's students' bureau to *Osret-el-Midan* was a complicated process; members spent a lot of time and effort in writing bylaws and creating solid organizational structures. The most controversial topic was the determination of *el-Osra's* rapport to the party, a relation that remains a subject of negotiations between the party's leadership and the student leadership.

Most of the members I interviewed assured me el-*Osra* has its own autonomy vis-à-vis the party. They make their own decisions and define their political positions according to their vision. Many almost bragged about taking positions contradictory to those of the party. (For example to vote or to boycott the referendum on the constitution 2014)

Nevertheless, some of them criticize the party's relation to its student. Amir, for example, one of the members of *Osret-el-midan* in Alexandria tells me

> The party does not listen to us, they do not take us seriously when they make decisions. Personally, I did not gain anything from the party, I only paid its political bills and defended its positions, which I was not convinced of nor was I part in their making. When our colleague X was arrested, the party did not do anything, they did not even send a lawyer to defend him.

In addition, the party's internal conflicts and competing wings often reflected on the *Osra*'s performance. Walid, one of the founders of *el-Osra* recounts that a member of an opposing clique actively tried to sabotage his meeting with the *Osra's* members in his governorate.

Since *Osret-el-midan* became active in September 2012, membership and activities have increased. However, when El-Baradei retired from political activity in August 2013[50], the student support clearly decreased (as shown by the decreasing number of members) because he was, for most members, a political "godfather" and a "symbol for change".

In September 2014, when the regime imposed a new order in the University to neutralize contention, one of the foundations of this new order was the decision to prohibit all student organizations affiliated to political parties. This included *Osret-el-Midan*, who, despite the ban, managed to continue working while keeping a relatively "low profile" by operating under different names.

The aim of the previous account was to illustrate the path of one contentious student organization. In the following paragraphs, we will demonstrate how these transformations of one network of actors were related to the possibilities of the context.

Before 2011, the organized political contention was highly risky and subject to security control, therefore, student members of the national campaign for change worked individually and

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[50]After Morsi's destitution, the interim president Adly Mansour named EL-Baradei Vice-prime minister, as he was one of the figures supporting the destitution however on the eve of the violent dispersal of the Raba'a sit-in El-Baradei resigned from office and has not been politically active since then

randomly. After the uprising and the role El-Baradei played in it, his supporters created active, systematic networks that ultimately formed the body of his presidential campaign. Upon his withdrawal, many of his supporters engaged in other forms of campaigning like haqqena or joined the campaigns of other "revolutionary" presidential candidates. This shows the transfers between different networks of contentious actors. With the Muslim brotherhood in power, the need for institutionalized opposition appeared, hence, the party and its students' bureau were created. Later, the format of Osret-el-midan was seen as more suited for work in the university. Currently, Osret-el-midan has a clear organizational structure, nevertheless, its members' activities are limited because of the restrictions imposed from the new regime on the universities, but also because the contentious space is primarily occupied by "students against the coup".[51]
In sum, the same network was systematically transformed in shape and size according to the fluctuating context where possibilities of action were continuously modified.

Osret-el-midan's repertoire of contention

These transformations of the arena did not only affect *Osret-el-midan's* shape and structure, but also their strategies and their areas of activism. Generally, my interviewees distinguished three domains of action.First, the political,[52] which includes all that is related to a public cause, that reveals an affiliation with a political party and that sets the actors against the regime. This area includes all contentious activities such as demonstrations and sit-ins. The second is, advocacy of student political or socioeconomic rights, this area includes lawsuits, virtual and actual campaigns as well as participation or support in student union elections. The last area involves the student services which they perform in order to publicize a cause and raise funds for the organizations. This area includes activities such as concerts, trips, fairs, trainings, book clubs, and workshops etc. It is important to note that the distinction between these three areas is mainly discursive; concretely the boundaries between different activities are not that clear and overlap in many cases.

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[51] Until the time this paper was being written, since then the activity of "Students against the coup" was relatively neutralized due to regime repression. However, the space remains restricted for contentious activity even for non-MB organizations. *Osret-el-Midan* and similar organizations are sometimes forced to operate under different names and are in the process of rethinking their repertoire of contentious to less explicit confrontation with the regime and more service-related activity

[52] When an interviewee mentioned the word political I often asked them what they meant by it and their definitions were either   what is related to a " public" cause, all what reveals an affiliation with a political party and all what sets the actors against the regime. Some used the word political as a substitute for deceitful, not straight forward for others it meant negotiations and compromise

For most members, their "mission" is mainly political. *Osret-el-midan* was created for a political purpose (opposing the Muslim Brotherhood). Although *el-Osra* boycotted the 2012 student union elections, they were part of the anti-brotherhood coalition that lead the negotiations for the new regulation project and participated in the 2013 elections[53]. In June 2013, *Osret-el-midan* participated in the popular mobilizations against president Morsi, later, they joined the coalition of *Tareek el Thawra* (revolutionary road) a coalition of activists who were against the brotherhood as well as the military-backed regime. Since September 2013, contentious activity has become increasingly risky that is why members of *Osret-el-midan* feel forced to target advocacy and to provide social and cultural activities. Nowadays, they mainly organize book clubs, fairs and trips to historical sites with the hope of highlighting some sort of link with the current situation. They aim to deliver their message as implicitly as possible.

In 2013/2014, *Osret-el-midan* managed to create some opportunities for contentious mobilization despite the blocked space. Generally, the death or arrest of a colleague during clashes with the police presented such opportunities. By framing this person as a "martyr", they managed to get sympathy from other students (especially those who are not usually involved in politics) making a new wave of contention possible. It is observable that the chances for sympathy are much higher when this colleague is not an activist, but rather an "ordinary" student. On November 29th, 2013,when Mohammed Reda, a third year engineering student died on campus, many student organizations including *Osret-el-Midan* organized a sit-in in Cairo University to protest against the killings on campus. The fact that Reda was not involved in any "political activity" was a factor that highly increased the support.

Another opportunity for mobilization presents itself during the commemoration of "revolutionary events" like: Mohammed Mahmoud on November 19th, the Port-said massacre February 2nd and the departure of Mubarak on February 11th. Each year *Osret-el-midan* along with other movements commemorate these events with expositions, stand-ins, and demonstrations.

In sum, over three years, *Osret-el-midan*'s repertoire of collective action was transformed according to the possibilities of the context. What started with contentious rituals such as demonstrations, sit-ins, graffiti, petitions…etc. Ended up with expositions, workshops,

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[53] AFTE report accounts for the detailed results of these elections and how the coordination of non-Muslim brotherhood students managed to win considerably in most levels against the Muslim brotherhood

campaigns, discussion groups, aiming somehow to transfer a "culture of contention" since a concrete action is not possible.

Conclusion and remaining questions: Beyond the map of contentious student activism

The aim of this study is simple; it comes down to adding the "s" to Student Movement(s).

By accounting for the creation and transformations of the arena of the contentious student movements, and then *Osret-el-midan*, we showed the plurality of contentious student actors and the multiple ways through which they utilize the university as a space and adapt to the fluctuating context. Hence, we introduced a more dynamic view of student activism; one that goes beyond the approach influenced by the nationalist Student Movement and corresponds to the constant political and socioeconomic changes post-2011.

Nevertheless, deconstructing an analytical category by showing that it hides a diverse social reality is just a first step; the question that remains is how can we proceed further to study student activism in Egypt?

First, although this study proved the limits of the legacy of nationalism as an approach to student activism, many current activists still refer to the Student Movement and its history. Thus, we should not remove it completely from our consideration in further studies, we could, however, shift the question to the place of the past in the present. How did the history/memory of the nationalist Student Movement reach today's activists? Which groups refer to which history? And how does the legacy of nationalism affect today's contentious activism?

Second, this study had two foundations: Interviews and observations. There is a difference between what the actors do and how they explain what they do. This introduces a new dimension that must be taken into account in further studies, which is the discursive element of activism. How do people tell their stories? How do they construct the narrative of their engagement? How do they refer to the organizations where they are members? How do they refer to the "others" ?Finally how do they define the terms they use and how do they use the terms they define?

 Third, this study was a necessary step to identify the main organized actors. However, organizations are not living entities. Therefore, we must be able to identify, account for and

understand the place of the individuals within these organizations. In this paper, we were limited to an introductory analysis of the macro and meso level, our analysis was also limited to one direction (macro to meso), it needs to be pushed further to add the micro level with the inclusion of individuals' careers of activism as well as to emphasize both directions of the interactions. Finally, we showed the "here and now" interactions as they were accounted for by our interviewees. Further research should focus on how to situate these interactions, find the patterns, dispositions and the socioeconomic structural setting where they happen.

Annex 1 Recap: actors, mechanisms and episodes of student contentious politics in Egypt since 2011

Episode /mechanisms		Main contentious Student actors	
Mubarak regime: 1981-2011.	Neutralizing contention using security forces, co-opting student unions and eliminating candidates that are not pro-regime from the elections of SU	Organized contention: - Muslim Brotherhood (MB), -Revolutionary socialists (REV-SOC), - since 2008: April 6th, *Mokawma*	non-organized occasional demonstrations lead by MB with the participation of other students in support of the Palestinian cause and against the war on Iraq

Episode 1: March 2011-June 2011	Sudden opening loss of the upper hand of the regime and administrations	Organized contention: -the SUs: March 2011 first competitive elections no cooptation. Dominantly: MB + students pro old regime+ students from SA - Muslim Brotherhood (MB), -Revolutionary socialists (REV-SOC), - April 6th, Mokawma -Newly created movements: *Haraket Tahrir* - - ad hoc coordination structures, some based on the domain of study (movement of medical students) others based on the faculty (the movement of Cairo engineering revolutionaries)	non-organized demonstrations against the university leadership, affiliated with the "old" regime. Demonstrations to claim the establishment of a new legislative framework

Episode 2: September 2011-June 2013	Towards a new formal order for student activism the split between student organization	Organized contention: -the SUs: elections March 2012. Dominantly: MB students -- boycott by the rest because the new legislative framework was not established. The re-establishing of the Egyptian student union (ESU) them in march 2013: very competitive elections, the outcome of which was a mix of MB students and those of the Bureaus of political parties which were also the combination dominant in the ESU -Revolutionary socialists (REV-SOC), + April 6th, *Mokawma* - student bureaus affiliated to newly created political parties: *el midan, Masr el kaweya*	Mohammed Mahmoud November 2011, Participate in a general call for strike in February 2012 demonstrations against student living conditions in April 2013

eptember 2013- Now	Exponential increase in repression and limitations on students' contention -- restriction on the space from the new regime	Organized contention: -MB: the main target of regime repression, MB students, and their sympathizers continue to demonstrate under the name of "Students against the coup" - Student organizations old and new: secondary targets of regime repression, very strict limitations imposed on their activities -SUs: haven't been an election since April 2013, members graduated or exhausted, ESU no longer functioning -campaigns to reclaim the freedom of students who were arrested - "alternative campaigns" to spread consciousness about a certain political or socioeconomic cause	non-organized contention became increasingly costly given the frequent arrests, shootings and kidnaps on university campuses (some more than others, but generally there was exchanged violence between students and police) "Students against the coup"occupied the scene for a while until they were gradually neutralized through repression there were

			also few exceptional mobilizations led by non-MB students (especially FEPS SU) for living conditions in the university dorms

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