The Egyptian uprising of 2011 took everyone by surprise. The prevailing wisdom prior to 2011 was that Egypt’s society was too weak, fractured, and co-opted to challenge an eminently durable authoritarian regime. Even as protests swept through neighboring Tunisia in December and January, ultimately forcing its president, Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali, to flee the country, the sober refrain among scholars and experts was that “Egypt is not Tunisia.” Yet, despite these predictions, mass mobilization did erupt in Egypt, first on January 25 with a nationwide protest that defied expectations for turnout and scope, and then again on January 28, when an unprecedented wave of collective action overwhelmed the ostensibly indomitable security forces who withdrew from the streets and ceded their role to the military. The rallies and protesting continued for fourteen more days, until on February 11 President Hosni Mubarak, the octogenarian dictator who had ruled Egypt for three decades, stepped down from power.

How could this happen? More specifically, how could a supposedly weak and fragmented society, which had never before launched a nationwide protest, foment an uprising with enough scope and force to overwhelm the security forces of a powerful and repressive state in a matter of only four days? And if Egyptian society did in fact have the strength to launch such a successful protest movement, why did so many scholars and researchers fail to see it?

In this article I argue that the Egyptian uprising was brought about by a rapid and ultimately contingent reconfiguration of Egypt’s social networks. I focus specifically on the role of brokers in the uprising, and how these players’ responses to the remarkable success of the Tunisian revolution prompted them to take advantage of their positioning at the periphery of three social sectors and begin activating ties and facilitating coordinating. In a matter of days they transitioned from potential to active brokers. In describing this transition, I seek to demonstrate the potential instability of social structures, whose configurations can sometimes transform or shift quickly, based on the contingent actions of the players embedded within them. I raise questions about the tendency in
social movement theory to characterize these structures as rigid or static and instead suggest that the actions of strategically positioned players, acting under the influence of a powerful set of ideas, can bring about changes in structures themselves. Such shifts can in turn catalyze large-scale social phenomena, like movements or revolutions, where formerly they may not have been likely or possible.

Due to their positioning at the periphery of three major social sectors, the brokers in the Egyptian uprising had long been positioned to serve as intermediaries, but had never actually acted as brokers before. As a result, Egypt’s social sectors were largely autonomous and disconnected, a fact often cited in the scholarship as evidence of Egypt’s societal weakness. There were three largely autonomous social sectors that were important in providing the uprising with its initial momentum: the Cairo-based political opposition, the informal Egyptian labor movement, and the Society of Muslim Brothers (MB). Each sector had a large number of well-integrated members, a relatively national scope, and experience in confronting the regime through protest. Other scholars who have studied these events have also noted that the strength of these sectors was underappreciated prior to the uprising and have called particular attention to the importance of their many experiences challenging the regime in the street. However, none of these groups was individually strong enough to present a meaningful threat to the regime. Moreover, their history of cooperation was extremely weak, and those actors positioned to serve as brokers between them had for years been either unable or unwilling to embrace this role. The first group of brokers, a collection of labor and human rights NGOs, had long sustained ties to both the informal labor movement and the political opposition, but for strategic and political reasons had resisted bringing the two together. The second group, reformist members of the Muslim Brotherhood (many of whom were youth), had long sought to broker coordination with the broader political opposition but had rarely succeeded due to their more subordinate positions within the MB’s organizational hierarchy and the leadership’s reticence toward cross-partisan collaboration. However, the revolution in Tunisia that culminated in mid-January 2011 had a profound effect on the perceptions and strategic calculations of many Egyptians, including these potential brokers and their interlocutors. In the aftermath of Ben Ali’s departure, the Egyptian political atmosphere became charged with a sense of possibility that these actors had never experienced before. As their attitudes toward mobilization and the possibility for radical change shifted, so too did their stances toward coordination and cooperation. Suddenly they were willing to take new kinds of political risks, transforming themselves in a matter of days from marginal players at the periphery of established networks into active brokers facilitating first-time coordination between otherwise autonomous social sectors.

The work these brokers did in the days preceding the decisive protest on January 28 was critical to giving the mobilization the level of synchronicity and scope necessary to overcome the security apparatus of the Mubarak police state. During the planning for the two major protest events, brokers passed along crucial information about logistics and repertoires and, in some cases, sought to persuade actors in positions of power to endorse the protests and activate the individuals in their network. In the first case, the lobbying efforts of the labor and human rights NGOs, as well as certain other strategically
situated actors, were sufficient to attract the participation of large sectors of the informal labor movement to the protests on January 25, which had been organized by political activists from the Cairo-based opposition. In the second case, members of the reformist wing of the Muslim Brotherhood worked assiduously to cajole their superiors into endorsing the protests; then, once the group’s leadership had agreed to participate, the brokers passed along information about the protest logistics, creating the conditions necessary for the MB membership’s wholesale participation in the January 28 protest.

My analysis and conclusions are based primarily on twenty-eight interviews that I conducted during the summer of 2011 in Cairo, Alexandria, and Suez. My interviewees were activists, lawyers, politicians, and journalists drawn from an array of social sectors and geographic locales. My initial interviewees were individuals with whom I had met during a previous research trip to study the pro-democracy Kefaya movement, many of whose leaders or members were integral to the planning of the 2011 uprising. After reaching out to this collection of individuals, I relied primarily on a snowballing technique for collecting additional interviews. As I learned more about the sectors and organizations that had contributed to the uprising, I arranged interviews with members and leaders from each one, ideally those who had acted as brokers or those who had been involved in planning or coordination. I supplemented these interviews with a detailed reading of articles from the Arabic language press that were published during the days preceding and during the uprising. I triangulated data from these news articles with my interviews to develop a fine-grained picture of the degree and nature of mobilization from January 25 to January 28, including where protests were planned and where they actually materialized, who led them and who participated, and the kinds of repertoires and tactics that activists deployed.

**Networks, Brokers, and Contingency**

Though there is a tendency in much of the writing about movements and revolutions to describe mobilization as a set of predictable and rule-bound processes, some scholars have called attention to the inherently contingent facets of collective action. For example, Charles Kurzman’s account of the Iranian revolution takes issue with the literature’s attempts to “retroactively predict” major protest events by identifying, after the fact, a set of mechanistic processes that brought about certain social outcomes. He points out that revolutions are inherently confusing events and that they bring about radical swings in individuals’ perceptions, emotions, and strategic calculations. Not only can scholars never know when a given individual will decide to enter the streets in protest against the state, but even the individual himself may not have a good idea of when he will cross that threshold. Such unpredictability, he argues, renders any attempt to predict the timing of an uprising an exercise in futility.

Kurzman’s argument introduces the notion of contingency at the level of the individual into understandings of protest participation. It calls attention to the concatenation of forces that shape whether an actor will or will not join a protest.
draws on this insight to discuss the interplay between an agent’s contingent actions and the social structures that bound those potential actions. In his account, structures define the array of possibilities for action, but a broad array of conjunctural factors shape individual decisions and actions within these structures.

My argument further develops this line of thinking, pointing out that social structures are themselves fluid and unstable and that they too can change quickly and unpredictably; their shapes, characteristics, and functions can be shaped by contingency in the same way as individual actors. I find the concept of the network useful for this argument. Since social networks are built around relations between actors, they have the potential not only to take on the characteristics of social structures but also to allow for considerations of agency and change. In this sense, they make it possible to integrate social analysis at both the individual and the collective level, or, as Mustafa Emirbayer and Jeff Goodwin have put it, to “bridge the micro-macro gap.” Moreover, because networks are understood to be more dynamic than other kinds of structures, they are better able to demonstrate how contingency can operate at the structural, as well as the individual, level.

Other scholars have also embraced network analysis to study mobilization. Most of their studies focus on how networks of individuals facilitate recruitment and participation in social movements. A smaller collection of scholarship, which comes closer to the way in which I employ the network concept, uses networks to understand inter-organizational dynamics within social movements. These latter studies focus both on how organizations relate to each other—how they form ties, build coalitions, and jointly manage campaigns—and how the overarching structure of inter-organizational linkages gives social movements their particular shapes and forms. Much of this writing conceives of networks in broadly static terms and fails to take full advantage of network analysis’ potential to account for dynamism and change. Scholars tend to focus on how the structural attributes of a social network determine certain outcomes: whether an individual will be recruited to a movement, for example, or whether a multiorganizational field will be capable of organizing sustained collective action. Though the literature on networks sometimes recognizes that networks change over time, most arguments rely on an under-theorized conception of the kinds of forces and dynamics that cause social networks to emerge and evolve. Mustafa Emirbayer and Jeff Goodwin were among the first to point to these biases, arguing that scholars had not properly conceptualized the important role of culture and human agency in explaining how and why networks change. Though they grant that the structure of networks does constrain and facilitate particular actions and thus helps to explain certain social outcomes, the literature “fails to show exactly how it is that intentional, creative human action serves in part to constitute those very social networks that so powerfully constrain actors in turn.”

One way to make better sense of the inherently dynamic and recursive relationship between individual actors and the network structures that they face is to focus on key, strategically positioned individuals and study how their actions shape the network structures in which they are embedded. Several studies on networks and movements have
highlighted the importance of brokers—actors who forge ties between otherwise separate sectors, networks, or organizations. Early considerations of brokerage tended to emerge from the realm of economic sociology, with scholars like Peter Marsden, Ronald Burt, Mark Granovetter, and David Knoke pointing out the ways in which brokers use their unique structural positions to capitalize on weak ties between otherwise separate clusters of actors. In an important appropriation of this idea to the social movements field, Mario Diani demonstrated that certain actors within social movements, though not functioning as “leaders” in the conventional sense of being top-down organizers, nevertheless enjoy considerable influence due to their positions as intermediaries between movement organizations. These brokers are important because they both facilitate exchanges of material resources and provide communication links that help organizations bridge symbolic or discursive differences. The idea of brokerage also gained prominence with Doug McAdam, Sidney Tarrow, and Charles Tilly’s Dynamics of Contention framework. Their perspective focuses less on the well-positioned actors who serve as brokers than on the relatively uniform and iterative mechanism of brokerage itself, which they define as: “the linking of two or more previously unconnected social sites by a unit that mediates their relations with one another and/or with yet other sites.”

If brokers are so important for linking networks together, then surely their actions will have a determining effect on the shape of these network structures. Yet the literature has thus far failed to take note of such an insight. Here it is useful to draw on a criticism levied by James Kitts, who contends that network analysis focuses too much on the existence of ties between two individuals and too little on the content and meaning of those ties. Kitts points out that social ties have multivalent, not unidimensional, effects; what matters are the kinds of information, identities, and discourses that are exchanged through these relationships and the impact those exchanges may have on actors’ behaviors. Instead, the literature focuses almost entirely on the structural position of brokers in a sector or network (that is, a broker’s centrality or marginality) and understands brokerage ties as acting in uniform and iterative ways, inevitably bringing different actors closer together. Yet, fundamentally, the role of the broker is to negotiate between two disparate agents, and whether the broker chooses to act as a negotiator or whether that negotiation succeeds can be shaped by an array of conjunctural factors. A broker’s strategic position between two actors only suggests potential influence. In the end, whether brokerage occurs will depend both on a broker’s willingness to mediate between two actors and on those two actors’ receptivity to the broker’s negotiation efforts. Whether a potential broker becomes an active broker depends as much on the ideas that influence these contingent negotiations as the broker’s positioning within a multiorganizational field.

In the analysis below I demonstrate that the brokerage dynamics in the Egyptian uprising were the product of highly contingent circumstances. The contingency of these brokerage dynamics can explain the surprising and rapid shifts in Egypt’s social configurations in the days before and during the uprising. The fluidity and unexpectedness of these changes belies conventional conceptions of social structures as static or, at most,
slowly evolving. In Egypt, the relationships that comprised social networks were reconstituted not in a matter of months or years but in a matter of days, prompted by a set of inspiring ideas that influenced the actions of potential brokers and their interlocutors. The remarkable series of events in neighboring Tunisia and the notion that such change might be possible in Egypt prompted these actors to quickly and suddenly change their strategic calculations. The results were a rapid reconfiguration of the social relationships that defined the networks of Egyptian society and the creation of new possibilities for massive and coordinated social action.

**Egypt’s Opposition Social Sectors**

There were three largely autonomous social sectors that were important for giving the Egyptian uprising its momentum: the Cairo-based political opposition, the informal Egyptian labor movement, and the Society of Muslim Brothers. While “normal Egyptians” (that is, those not directly embedded in any of these sectors) undoubtedly participated in the protests on January 25 and January 28, the events were organized, led, and propelled by individuals who were affiliated with these three sectors. In some ways it is useful to think of each sector as constituting its own autonomous network, with individuals linked together through shared ideological beliefs, past experiences with activism, and common membership or involvement in certain organizations or projects. Most important for the argument here is that although all three sectors had independently engaged in collective action against the regime in the years before the uprising, they had never been able to cooperate with each other on any widespread or sustained movement or campaign. Their concerns and goals were mostly distinct, and their ties to each other few and weak.

The first sector that was important for spearheading the uprising was the Cairo-based political opposition, a collection of social movements, parties, and political groups that had tried, with varying degrees of success during the 2000s, to challenge the political hegemony of the Mubarak regime. Their first major effort came in late 2003, when political leaders from a variety of ideological currents began to build a social movement to oppose Hosni Mubarak directly, which they called Kefaya. For much of 2005, in the run-up to a Presidential election in September that Hosni Mubarak was virtually guaranteed to win, Kefaya successfully organized tens of protests, the most successful of which garnered support from thousands of followers and set a new precedent of using political protest to challenge the regime. It also politicized a new generation of youth activists, who forged relationships and experiences that later evolved into new and more durable social movements. One such group was the 6 April Youth, a small youth movement which was formed in 2008 when several youth activists who had been involved with Kefaya called on the Internet for a national day of protest in solidarity with a workers’ strike scheduled for April 6. Though the event was largely unsuccessful, the activists who had called for the protests stayed in touch over the Internet and then began meeting in person, eventually forming the 6 April Youth.
In the five years following the limited success of the Kefaya movement, this sector managed to organize only a handful of small protests and campaigns. Though regime repression could partly explain this lack of meaningful collective action, it was also driven by the weakness of the sector itself, which was plagued by internecine rivalries, a lack of resources, and little presence outside Cairo and Alexandria. Still, three events in 2009 and 2010 prompted the political opposition to begin resolving some of these internal problems, so that by the end of 2010 it was in a somewhat stronger position to wage collective action. The first event was the return to Egypt of Mohammed el-Baradei, the former director of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). Baradei announced that he was considering running for president and that he would form an organization called the National Association for Change (NAC) to push for democratic reform. The NAC was, in many ways, a reconstituted version of the coalition that had formed the Kefaya movement and included many veteran leaders from the most important political opposition groups. The second event was the murder of Khaled Said, a young man living in Alexandria, at the hands of two corrupt police officers in June 2010. When photos of Said’s broken face began circulating on the Internet, the Cairo-based opposition sprang into action and organized a series of protests in Alexandria and in front of the Interior Ministry. Finally, the highly fraudulent Parliamentary election held at the end of 2010 prompted another wave of political protest from the opposition sector. Most opposition parties ultimately boycotted the elections, anticipating the widespread fraud, and there were several protests following the release of the results, in which the pro-regime NDP was said to have won over 90 percent of seats.

The second social sector that contributed to the uprising was a network of independent labor syndicates, informal workers’ groups, and labor-oriented NGOs that formed the core of the informal Egyptian labor movement. For the better part of the previous decade, these groups had been pressing the regime over a number of economic grievances, which had arisen in part out of a series of neo-liberal economic reforms that undermined many core workers’ rights. Sometimes their mobilizations took the form of strikes and sit-ins over basic economic demands; sometimes they developed into longer-term campaigns, such as the Egyptian real estate tax collectors’ ultimately successful effort in 2008 to form an independent labor union.

Though these labor mobilizations occurred in many sectors of the economy and many regions of the country, for most of the decade it could not be said that they emerged from any unified labor movement. The strikes and protests were mostly small and isolated, and the demands focused on localized economic grievances. In addition, they were almost entirely independent of the Cairo-based opposition’s more political campaigns against the regime. Although at various points in the decade leaders in the political opposition tried to form ties with the nascent labor movement, their efforts were mostly ineffective. According to Wael Habib, a worker from the industrial town of Mahalla al-Kubra who had helped lead a major strike in 2006, there was no connection between the workers and the political opposition: “We had no coordination with the activism that was going on in Cairo—like Kefaya and the others. We didn’t have any link with anyone.” He went on to explain that laborers had little interest in
the kind of confrontational, abstract political demands that the Cairo-based opposition was raising.

By the end of the decade the fragmented labor movement had begun to inch toward national consolidation, with two particular campaigns uniting workers and labor activists from a variety of industries. The first was a push to create more independent labor unions, like the one that had been formed by the tax collectors in 2008. The second was a legal and political campaign to implement a national minimum wage that would reflect the basic cost of living. Both of these campaigns were aided and facilitated by a collection of Cairo-based labor and human rights NGOs, which provided them with the resources and coordination necessary to organize at a national level. The most prominent of these NGOs were the Center for Trade Union and Workers Services (CTUWS), the Hisham Mubarak Law Center (HMLC), and the Egyptian Center for Economic and Social Rights (ECESR). These NGOs mostly played supporting and coordinating roles in the campaigns, not wanting to get ahead of the workers’ own demands or push them into uncomfortable political territory. As Nadim Mansour, the Executive Director of the ECESR, explained: “We had a very broad mandate and we had a lot of connections. But in the end our role, and the role of the NGOs in general, was supportive.” They positioned themselves as hubs at the center of overlapping networks of lawyers, activists, and laborers, working to bring different groups together to coordinate over a shared goal or campaign. The NGOs were also important because they maintained strong relationships with the political parties and social movements based in Cairo that comprised the first opposition sector. Though they always claimed to be non-political, they had played host to a number of opposition initiatives over the decade. They had also provided legal services to activists in the Kefaya movement and the 6 April Youth. However, despite their relatively strong ties to both labor and political activists, the NGOs had never sought to bring the two together. According to the NGOs’ leaders, this was a deliberate choice driven by two major considerations. First, they always sought to play a supportive rather than a leadership role in the campaigns they endorsed. Second, those laborers with whom the NGOs worked were largely disinterested in joining campaigns oriented around abstract political issues like democratization and would likely resist any efforts to broker their participation with political groups (just as they had resisted the political opposition’s direct outreach efforts). Moreover, such efforts might actually backfire by convincing laborers that the NGOs were more interested in grand political projects than in supporting their own bread-and-butter economic demands.

The third sector that was important during the initial days of the uprising was the Society of Muslim Brothers (MB). In many ways the MB of 2011 could alternately be described as an organization and a network. On the one hand, it had formal positions and a hierarchical leadership, which included a General Guide and a Guidance Bureau of sixteen senior members. Below this leadership, MB members were collected into groups of forty or so individuals called families, through which they would participate in religious, social-outreach, and occasionally political activities. On the other hand, the MB also exhibited many characteristics of a network. Its members’ levels of...
commitment varied widely, and many Egyptians were only loosely embedded in its structures, sometimes due to general ideological affiliation and sometimes purely to gain material benefits. Even within its more institutionalized bodies, its members and leaders held a diverse array of opinions, and some of them would participate in political activities outside of the Brotherhood. As I argue below, paying attention to the network characteristics of the MB can be helpful in making sense of how and why the organization’s leadership ultimately decided to endorse the uprising.

Because of a long history of repression at the hands of various regimes, the Muslim Brotherhood before 2011 was wary of engaging in direct political action and resisted creating political partnerships with other groups. The majority of the senior leadership retained a cautious and suspicious attitude toward political participation and preferred to focus on the MB’s core program of social outreach. On occasion, when an issue directly affected the organization, the MB would rally its members to protest with an efficiency and breadth that was the envy of other opposition groups. However, the leaders generally demonstrated an unwillingness to draw on the group’s full mobilizing potential, fearing the regime’s possible responses and doubting the utility of joining broader political projects, which might involve coordination with (and thus a partial ceding of control to) other political groups. However, an outspoken minority of MB leaders believed that the group ought to more directly engage in informal politics, both through opposition coalitions and by more frequent protesting in the street. During the 2000s this minority became increasingly critical of the Society’s organizational insularity and began reaching out independently to form relationships and ties with members of other political opposition groups. They coordinated with leftists to organize events in the early 2000s supporting the Palestinian Intifada, and some of them participated in the protests of the Kefaya movement. These leaders were also joined during the decade by a cadre of moderate and open-minded young MB members, who participated in opposition movements like Kefaya and the 6 April Youth and formed friendships with young Egyptians from other political currents. Although the political projects and cross-partisan connections of these youth members and moderate leaders created some tensions within the MB, the disagreements mostly stayed behind closed doors, with the leadership largely tolerating their activities as long as they did not violate official rules or positions.

Before the 2011 uprising, these three sectors—the Cairo-based opposition, the informal labor movement, and the Muslim Brotherhood—constituted the three principle loci of political resistance within Egyptian society. Though each sector had experience in confronting the state and had fairly well-developed networks linking together its members and groups, none was independently strong enough to challenge the regime on important issues. Moreover, though linkages between the sectors did exist, primarily through the labor NGOs and reformist MB members, these ties were relatively few and weak, and they had never been leveraged to facilitate meaningful coordination. The combination of the sectors’ individual weaknesses and the lack of strong ties between them is what led many scholars to characterize Egyptian society as too weak to mount a real challenge to the Mubarak regime.
Brokerage and the Egyptian Uprising

At the end of December 2010 events in Tunisian and Egypt began to evolve in unexpected ways, creating a set of exogenous conditions that would radically reconfigure the perceptions and calculations of key players within and between the three social sectors described above. First, on December 17, 2010, Mohammed Bouazizi, a fruit vendor in southern Tunisia, doused himself with paint thinner and set himself on fire in protest against the Tunisian state’s repressive and unjust policies. The protests that this event ignited spread quickly through the country, reaching the capital city of Tunis by December 27. Three days later, in Egypt, Ahmed Maher of the 6 April Youth created an event on Facebook for a day of protest to coincide with Egypt’s National Police Day on January 25.\(^\text{30}\) The 6 April Youth leaders were hoping to use the occasion to call attention to police abuse and other excesses of the security state. On January 14, after ten more days of fierce protesting in Tunisia, the country’s president, Zine el-Abdin Ben Ali, boarded a plane and fled to Saudi Arabia. The activists planning the January 25 event, who until then had been hoping for a moderate-sized protest of perhaps one or two thousand people, decided that they should aim for something greater. The idea that popular mobilization in a neighboring Arab state could force a dictator out of office after only a month of protesting gave the activists a new sense of empowerment.\(^\text{31}\) Mohamed Adel, one of the 6 April Youth leaders, stated simply: “We watched as the Tunisian revolution took off and then toppled Ben Ali from power. And we looked at ourselves and said: ‘we can do that too.’”\(^\text{32}\)

Maher, Adel, and their colleagues in the 6 April Youth began reaching out to activists from other youth groups, including young members of the Muslim Brotherhood, and eventually formed a committee of thirty individuals from six youth groups and movements.\(^\text{33}\) They began meeting on an almost daily basis and formed sub-committees with responsibility for different planning tasks: picking protest locations, reaching out to other organizations, coordinating with groups in governorates beyond Cairo, developing slogans, publishing information on the Internet, and printing paper pamphlets.\(^\text{34}\) In an effort to maximize the size of the event, the committee sought to activate the full network of individuals and organizations that formed the political opposition sector. They reached out to youth activists and contacts in cities outside Cairo, encouraging them to stage their own marches and protests on Police Day.\(^\text{35}\) They also contacted more senior members of the political opposition, including the leaders of Mohamed el-Baradei’s NAC, who promised to send their members to one of the planned protest locations, in Downtown Cairo.\(^\text{36}\)

Most critical, however, was the youth groups’ efforts to coordinate with their contacts who had ties to other social sectors, especially the labor movement. They had a particularly strong relationship with the HMLC and the ECESR, both of which had frequently offered their offices as meeting spaces for youth movements, including during the planning of the January 25 event. Tellingly, on January 24 the youth committee set up a “control room” in a conference room in the ECESR where five youth activists remained on January 25 to man the telephones and coordinate the different protests.\(^\text{37}\)
Pointing to the example of Tunisia, they also asked the leaders of the NGOs to disseminate information and encourage their contacts in other cities and sectors to participate. The NGO leaders agreed to tap into the networks that they had built over the previous five years, alerting lawyers, activists, and labor leaders in towns throughout Egypt about the details of the upcoming protest and urging them to provide support. For example, they reached out to labor activists in the industrial city of Mahalla al-Kubra, where the political opposition had only a handful of representatives, and convinced them to sign onto the protests. Wael Habib, the labor leader from Mahalla al-Kubra, explained the importance of the NGOs’ outreach:

The Hisham Mubarak center was mostly responsible for collecting all the workers [in Mahalla] together before the uprising because they had worked with us all before. We used to have our meetings with other [labor] activists in their offices. But the 6th of April youth didn’t have significant presence in Mahalla and they weren’t important for organizing the protests there.

Thanks to the outreach of the NGOs, when the April 6 Youth released a statement on January 24 announcing the groups that would participate in the protests, they were able to include the spinning and weaving workers from Mahalla al-Kubra on their list.

The sense of anticipation and possibility created by the revolution in Tunisia gave the leaders of the NGOs and their interlocutors the impression that the protest on January 25 might actually garner broad support and force a change in Egypt’s political system. Ahmed Seif al-Islam, the founder and director of the Hisham Mubarak Law Center, described how the Tunisian uprising changed his and his colleagues’ perceptions and created the possibility for new levels of coordination:

Tunisia is what changed our attitudes and the reason everyone was able to overcome the barrier of fear. It gave us hope and changed our whole mentality.

. . . In all the other cities around Egypt, Tunisia gave people an example. All we tried to do was create a harmony between our contacts in these various places. We didn’t really have to convince them. It wasn’t difficult—we knew these people because we had visited many times and all we had to do was tell them what was going to happen, and they agreed with us and agreed to join.

He further explained that before January 2011 these contacts around Egypt were mostly concerned with their own local campaigns, and the Hisham Mubarak Law Center had supported them only in these endeavors. However, with the Tunisian precedent fresh in everybody’s mind, it was not difficult for him and his colleagues to win broad support for the planned national protest.

Another important broker between the political opposition and the labor sector was Kemal Abu Eita, the head of the recently formed independent real estate tax collectors union and a prominent leader in the Karama Party. Abu Eita was one of the few leaders in the labor movement who had also been active in some of the political opposition’s major campaigns, including the Kefaya movement and the NAC (of which the
Karama Party was a member). However, like his NGO counterparts, he had never before served as an active broker between these sectors, keeping his political activism mostly separate from his work with the labor movement. He took on a prominent role in leading the real estate tax collectors’ campaigns for a higher wage and for an independent union but was careful not to push his colleagues too hard or force political demands upon them that they were not ready to embrace. But in the ten days prior to January 25 Abu Eita connected with his colleagues from Karama and other leftists in the political opposition and learned about the details of the planned protests. He then met with leaders in the real estate tax collectors union, and they collectively decided to endorse the Police Day protests and to rally their members across the country in support. They even postponed a demonstration they had been planning for the previous week to January 24 so as to help build momentum for the protest on Police Day. They also reached out to an array of labor contacts that they had formed through their campaigns for an independent labor union federation and a higher minimum wage and encouraged them to join the protests. According to Abu Eita, the changed environment brought about by the Tunisian revolution catalyzed a shift in the tax collectors’ strategic calculations and allowed him to broker their coordination with the political opposition for the first time ever.

The youth leaders from the political opposition were less successful in their attempts to convince the Muslim Brotherhood to support the protest. The planning committee included a number of MB youth members who had been active on some of the MB’s student committees and were respected as rising leaders within the organization. They went to the heads of their MB families, as well as to leaders from the group’s reformist bloc, and asked them to persuade the Guidance Bureau to officially support the protests. However, the MB leadership, in keeping with its historical reticence to participate in street demonstrations, refused to endorse the event. According to one youth leader, the Guidance Bureau disliked the idea of rallying Muslim Brothers for a protest that others had planned and worried about the regime’s likely heavy-handed security response.

Though there had been a good deal of anticipation ahead of the January 25 protests, even the youth planners were stunned by the day’s success. Despite plenty of security forces on the streets and the breakup of several planned protests, the turnout was broad and strong enough that the protesting continued until late into the night. The largest protest was in Mustafa Mahmoud Square in Giza, where thousands congregated at the appointed time and then marched for several hours until arriving in Tahrir Square to join with the political opposition groups who had been rallying in the Downtown area. They were also joined by pockets of activists from leftist and labor groups, including Kemal Abu Eita and a large contingent of tax collectors, who had been fleeing from the police in the poor neighborhood of Shubra al-Kheima. Outside Cairo, there were also major protests, particularly in cities that had well-organized youth groups, like Alexandria, Mansoura, and Ismailia, and in cities where the labor movement was well-represented, like Mahalla al-Kubra and Suez. There were also reports that MB members in Alexandria, who were known to often participate in street politics, contributed
significant numbers to the protests there even though the organization had not officially endorsed the event.50

At the end of the day, on January 25 the youth leaders gathered in Tahrir Square and decided to continue the day’s momentum and stage another “Day of Rage” on January 28. The planning for this day of protest was far more fluid than that which had taken place for January 25, in part because the activists only had two days to plan and in part because the heavy security presence in Cairo made it difficult to meet. The thirty members of the youth planning committee were never able to gather in one place, but through a number of smaller meetings and discussions online and over the phone they managed to develop a loose plan for January 28. They compiled a list of over thirty mosques and churches around Greater Cairo where protests would begin and then spill out into the streets to march towards Tahrir Square.51 They reached out to their contacts in the governorates, explaining the general framework for the protests—that they would begin in mosques and churches after noon prayers—and then left it up to the local groups to determine the most appropriate mosques and churches.52

Critically, the youth groups also sent their MB colleagues back to appeal up the MB chain of command and lobby the Guidance Bureau to endorse the Friday protests. On the evening of January 25, the MB youth sent three representatives to persuade senior leaders in the organization to mobilize the organization’s full membership for the next protest.53 Moaz Abdel Karim, one of the youth leaders on this delegation, described how afterward he was in constant communication with the head of his MB family, who was himself liaising with members of the senior leadership, passing information back and forth and trying to influence the leaders on the youths’ behalf.54 Muhammad al-Qassas, another youth member who was active in liaising with the MB leadership, said that they tried to appeal to the leaders’ pragmatic sensibilities; they argued that the next protest day could be big enough to force tangible political concessions from the regime and that it would be in the MB’s interest to be included in these negotiations.55

On the morning of January 27, the Guidance Bureau met and officially endorsed the protests. According to the reformist MB leader Mohamed el-Beltagui, who participated in the Police Day protests, the more conservative members of the Guidance Bureau shifted their positions after January 25 because of that protests’ unprecedented success. Ultimately, they agreed with the reformers’ assessment of the situation: if January 28 were to turn into a genuine moment of political change, the MB could not afford to be left on the sidelines.56 At the same time, they did not want to be seen as leading the protests, in case the January 28 protests failed and the regime decided to punish them for being so confrontational. This explains why the MB adopted a stance that they had almost always resisted in the past: mobilizing their full membership for a protest campaign that had been planned and organized by other groups.

Of course there is no way to know whether the MB reformers’ efforts brought about the shift in the Guidance Bureau’s position. However, even if their persuasive role was minimal, it is difficult to deny their importance as conduits of critical information.
regarding protest logistics and repertoires. According to Mohammad al-Qassas, once the MB leaders announced their decision, they reached out to the group’s youth members to learn about the plans for the protest day. He explained:

There was an agreement between the MB youth and the higher board that they would leave the organization to the youth groups. So we told them that these are the mosques where people are going to gather. And the board agreed to go along with this plan.57

Mohammed el-Beltagui also mentioned this dynamic: “The youth sent their messages and their plans, including the list of mosques, to the leadership. And the leadership agreed to go along.”58 According to Moaz Abdel Karim, when the MB leadership sent out text messages to their membership (a common way of communicating organization-wide instructions), their directions aligned with the plans that had been laid out by the youth committee. They told their members to begin protesting in mosques directly after finishing their noon prayers and to continue protesting until 8 PM.59

On January 28, these brokers’ efforts began to be bear fruit. As the youth organizers had planned, when Friday prayers ended at noon Egypt erupted in an unprecedented outburst of popular mobilization, with regular Egyptians from virtually every major population center joining the marches that flooded out of mosques and churches. Significant mobilization (of several hundred to tens of thousands) was reported in almost every one of Egypt’s twenty-seven governorates.60 For most of the afternoon, protesters battled the regime’s security forces, who used increasingly desperate measures to try to beat back the onslaught of bodies. Then, at the end of the afternoon, the police suddenly withdrew from the streets.61 A curfew was announced, and the army was deployed in every major city to restore order and enforce the curfew.

The political opposition, the labor movement, and the Muslim Brotherhood were crucial for providing the protests with their initial momentum, for leading them once they had started, and for giving them their sense of simultaneity. Almost every reported protest began in a mosque or church at the conclusion of the day’s noon prayer, when an activist or group of activists from one of the major sectors began chanting slogans against the regime. Moreover, many accounts suggested that the Muslim Brotherhood’s organizational strength and well-integrated membership played a particularly important role, especially in cities and towns outside Cairo where no protest had taken place on January 25.62 Though many Egyptians who were not embedded in any of these sectors and had never protested before undoubtedly took to the streets on January 28, the unprecedented convergence of these three social sectors was crucial for giving the day’s protests their momentum. Had it not been for the brokerage work of the labor NGOs and the moderate Muslim Brotherhood members, combined with the remarkable sense of possibility brought about by the Tunisian revolution, it is unlikely that these sectors could have coordinated their efforts so successfully, leading a series of protests that achieved what many thought was impossible: the defeat of the Mubarak regime’s security forces at the hands of popular mobilization.
Conclusion

The account above demonstrates how actors, strategically positioned at the periphery of social networks, can, under the influence of a powerful set of ideas, quite suddenly create new and powerful connections between disparate groups. The contingency of these brokerage dynamics explains how surprising social phenomena may occur, even where structural conditions would seem to preclude them.

In fact, the contingency of the three Egyptian networks’ alignment becomes all the more apparent when we take into account their trajectories in the period immediately following January 28. Though all of them would become important political players in post-Mubarak Egypt and would take on new organizational and institutional forms, they never worked together in the same way again. The youth groups in the political opposition continued to be celebrated as the leaders in what many popular accounts have termed a “youth revolution.” They formed a Revolutionary Youth Council during the sit-in in Tahrir Square to speak on behalf of the youth groups and then went on to form several small political parties. The rest of the political opposition split into several liberal and leftist parties, like the Social Democratic Party and the Free Egyptians Party, which ended up forming the core of the liberal-secular bloc in Egypt’s first post-Mubarak parliament. Even before Mubarak stepped down, the labor movement greatly accelerated its process of national consolidation. On January 30, the real estate tax collectors and three other tiny independent syndicates that had emerged under Mubarak held a press conference in Tahrir and announced the creation of Egypt’s first Independent Trade Union Federation; one year later the Federation, under the leadership of Kemal Abu Eita, had been joined by 300 other independent unions and had a membership of over two million. Finally, the Muslim Brotherhood went on to form a political party called Freedom and Justice, and during the Parliamentary elections at the end of 2011 the MB used their superior organizational strength to engineer a decisive victory for this party.

Moreover, the two sets of brokers who had been so crucial during the uprising never had the opportunity to serve in this capacity again. The labor and human rights NGOs continued to separately serve the political opposition and the labor movement, though as before, they limited their activities to legal and advocacy work. The MB youth grew disillusioned with the continued unwillingness of the group’s leadership to work with other political players. Many of them gave up their memberships and formed their own political party, al-Tayar al-Masry, thus severing their ties to the formal MB organization. The three social sectors thus reverted to their original positions of mutual autonomy, and those actors who had brokered cooperation between them either curtailed their brokerage activities or severed their ties to certain groups entirely. The convergence of these networks from January 25 to January 28 turned out to be a truly temporary arrangement, facilitated by a collection of contingent circumstances that created unprecedented and, until now, unrepeated possibilities for broad and powerful collective action.
NOTES


2. These scholars are proponents of what might be termed the “strong society” explanation of the Egyptian uprising, which emphasizes the underappreciated strengths of key social groups that had become well versed in the practices of activism, resistance, and protest. However, none of them provide a systematic account of why these groups, whose efforts prior to the uprising were largely ineffectual in achieving their demands and who never managed to coordinate with each other, suddenly joined forces on January 25 to lead such a successful protest movement. Mona el-Ghobashy, “The Praxis of the Egyptian Revolution,” *Middle East Report*, 258 (Spring 2011). Others who make similar arguments include: Marc Lynch, *The Arab Uprising: The Unfinished Revolutions of the New Middle East* (New York: Perseus Books, 2012); Joel Beinin and Frederic Vairel, eds., *Social Movements, Mobilization, and Contestation in the Middle East and North Africa* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011); Asef Bayat, “Paradoxes of Arab Refo-Lutions,” *Jadaliyya*, March 3, 2011; Amy Austin-Holmes, “There Are Weeks When Decades Happen: Structure and Strategy in the Egyptian Revolution,” *Mobilization*, 17 (December 2012), 391–407.


4. This focus on the individual is shaped in part by Kurzman’s and other constructionists’ interest in rebutting many of the assumptions stemming from rational choice theory, which assume that individuals are utility maximizing actors and that their decisions and actions are therefore predictable.


9. For example, in Maryjane Osa’s study of the Polish Solidarity movement, she writes: “This study has shown that opposition networks change over time, and that these structural changes affect the potential for the further development of antiregime organizations and for sustained mobilization.” She documents these changes by taking selective “snap-shots” of network structures in Poland. Lacking in her account, however, is an explanation of how these “snap-shots” link together — that is, how and why a less-complex network evolves to become more complex over time. See: Osa, 2003, 179.

10. Mustafa Emirbayer and Jeff Goodwin, 1411–54.

11. Ibid, 1413.


17. A similar argument is made by Chaeyoon Lim, who argues with regard to social ties that “it is not simply the strength of the relationship, but what is exchanged through it that is important.” Chaeyoon Lim, “Social Networks and Political Participation: How Do Networks Matter?” Social Forces, 87 (December 2008), 975.

18. Other scholars have also identified these three sectors as the principal social groups opposed to Mubarak in the period before the uprising, and the groups most responsible for leading the protests of 2011. See, for example: el-Ghobashy; Lynch; Beinin and Varel, eds.; Esam al-Amin, The Arab Awakening Unveiled (Washington, DC: American Educational Trust, 2013); James Gelvin, The Arab Uprisings: What Everyone Needs to Know (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).


20. Ahmed Maher, founder and leader of 6 April Youth, interview, Cairo, 6 August 2011; Mohammed Adel, founder and leader of 6 April Youth, interview, Cairo, August 17, 2011.


22. Wael Habib, labor leader from Mahalla al-Kubra, interview, Cairo, August 18, 2011.

23. During interviews, NGO leaders often downplayed their organizations’ roles in campaigns and insisted that they were there merely to support worker-led initiatives. Ahmed Seif al-Islam, Director of the Hisham Mubarak Law Center, interview, Cairo, July 30, 2011; Nadim Mansour, Executive Director of the Egyptian Center for Economic and Social Rights, interview with the author, Cairo, August 2, 2011.

24. Mansour, interview.

25. For example, rather than labor leaders from working class towns in the governorates connecting directly with each other, they would converge on Cairo and hold meetings or attend workshops in the offices of the HMLC and the ECESR. Wael Habib, labor leader from Mahalla al-Kubra, interview, Cairo, August 18, 2011; Mansour, interview.

26. al-Islam, interview; Mansour, interview. This reasoning was also confirmed by Kemal Abu Eita, the head of the tax collectors’ union, who because of his ties to a major opposition party and the Kefaya movement also served as a broker between the two networks. Kemal Abu Eita, president of the Independent Union of Real Estate Tax Collectors, interview, Cairo, August 20, 2011.

27. Moaz Abdel-Karim, Muslim Brotherhood youth leader, interview, Cairo, August 21, 2011; Khaled Tantawy, MB member, interview, Cairo, August 11, 2011.

28. For example, during 2005, at the same time as the Kefaya protests, the MB also organized protests to oppose the constitutional referendum and the presidential election that the regime was using to return Hosni Mubarak to the presidency. “Egypt Arrests Hundreds of Islamist Protesters,” Associated Press, May 4, 2005;

29. For further discussion of the inter-group tensions and factions within the MB during this period see: Carrie Rosefsky Wickham, “The Muslim Brotherhood and Democratic Transition in Egypt,” Middle East Law and Governance, 3 (2011), 204–33; and Hossam Tammam, “Back to the Future,” Al-Ahram Weekly, October 29–November 4, 2011.

30. Maher, interview.

31. This change in perceptions and new sense of possibility that was catalyzed by the Tunisian revolution was mentioned in every interview I conducted.

32. Adel, interview.

33. The groups were: the 6 April Youth, the Baradei campaign, the youth wing of the Democratic Front Party, the youth wing of the Ghad Party, certain young members of the Muslim Brotherhood, and a group called Youth for Justice and Freedom, a leftist group that had split off from 6 April six months before and had close ties to the Revolutionary Socialists. Adel interview; Israh Abdel-Fattah, founder of 6 April Youth and independent activists, interview, Cairo, August 20, 2011.

34. Moaz Abdel-Karim, Muslim Brotherhood youth leader, interview, Cairo, August 21, 2011; Abdel-Fattah, interview; Waleed Rashed, founder and leader of 6 April Youth, interview, Cairo, August 22, 2011; Bassem Kamel, Founder of the Egyptian Social Democratic Party, interview, Cairo, August 23, 2011.

35. For example, in Alexandria youth activists formed a similar committee to the one in Cairo, composed of different opposition groups, to plan for the protests there. Youth leaders were also meeting in Ismailia, Suez, and Mansoura. Baha’a Bastiwisy, member of 6 April Youth from Damanhour, interview, Cairo, August 23, 2011; Mahmoud Ibrahim, member of 6 April Youth from Suez, interview, Suez, August 15, 2011; Rashed, interview.

36. Abdel Galeel Mustafa, General Coordinator of the National Association for Change, interview, Cairo, August 14, 2011; George Ishak, Former General Coordinator of the Kefaya Movement, interview, Cairo, August 17, 2011.

37. Adel, interview.

38. Adel, interview.

39. Habib, interview.


41. Mansour, interview; al-Islam, interview.

42. Habib, interview.


44. Abu Eita, interview.

45. Abu Eita, interview.

46. Abdel-Karim interview; Muhammad al-Qassas, former Muslim Brotherhood youth leader and founder of the Tayar Masry Party, interview, Cairo, August 16, 2011.

47. al-Qassas, interview.


49. These protest locations were determined from reporting by the independent Egyptian daily Al-Masry Al-‘Youm printed in the January 26, 2011 and January 27, 2011 versions of the newspaper. See, especially: “al-alaf yusharikun fi ‘ihtijajat al-ghadb’ bi’al-muhafazhat,” Al-Masry Al-‘Youm, January 26, 2011.


51. Rashed, interview; Abdel-Fattah, interview.

52. Abdel-Karim, interview; Rashed, interview.

53. al-Qassas, interview.

54. Abdel-Karim, interview.

55. al-Qassas, interview.

56. Mohammed el-Beltagui, Former MP for the Muslim Brotherhood, interview, Cairo, August 11, 2011.

57. al-Qassas, interview.

58. el-Beltagui, interview.

59. Abdel-Karim, interview.

60. The exceptions were the remote and sparsely populated provinces of Wadi Jedid, South Sinai, and Red Sea. The protest locations for January 28 were determined primarily based on reporting from Al-Masry Al-‘Youm.

61. It is still unclear how this decision was made, who made it, and why. Whether the order came from Mubarak himself or from Habib al-Adly, the Interior Ministry, is still mostly a matter of speculation.
