I tasted the Middle East long before I ever saw it. When we would drive to my grandparents’ house in Fall River, Mass., my grandmother, Amelia, would feed us as soon as we would walk in the door. “Eat, eat, eat!” My brother and I complied, developing an enduring taste for tabbouleh, kibbeh and spinach pies that would serve as my family’s only real connection with the Lebanese ancestry on my father’s side.

My father and his siblings were assimilated seamlessly into American culture, as was customary at the time, and spoke no Arabic. I latched onto my Lebanese identity as a way to differentiate myself in the New Jersey suburbs, but I knew next to nothing about my heritage.

As an undergraduate at Drew University, though, I took a Middle East politics class and found myself so hooked on the region that I applied for a PhD program in political science. My first Arabic class was the day before Sept. 11. On Sept. 12, our little band of 10 students sat in stunned silence, haltingly sharing our feelings. I thought to myself, “What have I gotten myself into?”

The first time I flew to the Middle East was from Moscow to Beirut on an Aeroflot Tupolev-154, the workhorse of the Soviet air fleet. It was the summer of 2003, just four months after the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq that would unleash so much chaos across the region. The cramped cabin suggested a world of smaller dreams and tight control.

And it was fitting that a Cold War relic transported me to a region still suffering from the aftershocks of that twilight struggle — smothered by authoritarian rulers, many of whom dated back to the ‘60s and ‘70s, and who were supported by the Americans or Soviets at one point or another.

Most countries in the region were still controlled either by these rulers, including Muammar Qaddafi in Libya, by their half-wit children, like Syria’s Bashar Al-Assad, or by dull functionaries like Egypt’s Hosni Mubarak, who inherited the banal instruments of repression from his predecessors. I was headed to the only moderately democratic state in the Arab world, but one that had been ripped apart by a 16-year civil war and whose dynamism had subsequently been subdued by an informal Syrian occupation.

My summer in Beirut was dedicated to studying Arabic at the American University in Beirut, situated right on the Mediterranean in West Beirut. The city which had once been hailed by the jet set as “the Paris of the Middle East” was a plaintive request to be allowed just to exist. It was a plaintive request to be allowed just to exist. It was not a lament but rather a plea for a country so often ravaged by violence, premature death, decay and repression, which were the bitter fruits of the country’s civil war. On a bathroom stall in downtown Beirut, someone had scrawled, in Arabic script, the words “Die of natural causes.” It was not a lament but rather a plea for a country so often ravaged by violence, premature death, decay and repression, which were the bitter fruits of the country’s civil war.

My research eventually took me away from tiny Lebanon and its Byzantine politics, and toward Egypt, the heart of the Arab world and its most populous and influential country.
When I first visited Cairo in the summer of 2006, I found a city stifled by corruption, overcrowding and frustration. Some 15 million people were stuffed into an area no larger than metropolitan Chicago, and much of this sprawling growth had taken place unplanned in the past 30 years, as millions of Egyptians moved from the countryside to the country’s overburdened capital, looking for work. Two meager subway lines did their best to serve this teeming megapolis.

But most of daily life was conducted on ramshackle bus lines, minibuses, and most of all, black-and-white taxis — ancient Fiats and Peugeots, dubbed “flying coffins” by the locals. The pollution from this improvisational transit system made breathing Cairo’s air like smoking two packs of cigarettes a day, which many Egyptians did anyway.

The misery of Cairo’s poor would often boil over in the streets in the form of impromptu dust-ups between cab drivers, shouting matches that could snarl traffic for a mile. But typically it was sublimated in a barely-expressed hope for change. Egypt’s prisons still held thousands of political prisoners, and the regime of Hosni Mubarak was notorious for the gleeful lawlessness of its police forces.

Perhaps just as ominously, the government could not figure out how to put its graduates to work, meaning young people were caught in a marriage-less limbo, from which there was often no escape but resignation and bitterness. Even so, this tinderbox of a city was often no escape but resignation and bitterness. Even so, this tinderbox of a city was often no escape but resignation and bitterness.

T he Middle East to which I returned this summer has been utterly transformed by a series of popular uprisings, often coordinated and publicized on those very digital platforms that once seemed so innocuous. It was on this first trip, too, that I met young Egyptians who were using the Internet as a kind of alternative public sphere — bloggers writing about the rights of women and minorities, activists organizing and coordinating illegal demonstrations downtown, and the leaders of a Facebook group known as the April 6th Youth Movement, who were demanding an end to the authoritarian practices of Mubarak’s regime.

Unlike countries like China and Saudi Arabia, the Egyptian government never really tried to shut down or black these web sites, preferring to escape the activists with brief jail terms and harassment. The very lightness of their punishment in comparison to the torture and indefinite detention meted out to members of the Muslim Brotherhood, for instance, revealed the regime’s belief that Internet activism was not a serious threat.

Even so, my meetings with these activists would often be cloak-and-dagger. One interview with an April 6th leader named Ahmed Maher in the summer of 2009 took place in the middle of a labyrinthine street in downtown Cairo, and he spent the entire hour furtively looking around for spies from the Egyptian secret services, known as the Mukhabarat.

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providing information to protesters, producing the discourse of dissent, and updating both Egyptians and international observers about the unfolding events.

Of course, some of this organizing took place offline to evade detection by ever-watchful state minders, but some of the credit for its success is owed to the tools of digital activism. For years most ordinary citizens made the perfectly reasonable choice to go about daily life, to avoid politics and to try to make a living in incredibly difficult circumstances. But this all changed on Jan. 25, when tens of thousands answered the clarion call of the digital elite. Digital activists coordinated a brilliant tactical maneuver by which they rode in on horseback and murdered hundreds of protesters. The people were celebrating.

He noted that the revolution was the culmination of a longwave of digital activism that first flowered during the second Palestinian intifada in 2001. “We were using the Internet for 10 years,” Fathy told me, “and it was the only open space we had.”

These activists are now scrambling to find their place in normal politics, where grassroots organizations like the Muslim Brotherhood have the upper hand over the millions of Egyptians who do not have Internet access and don’t necessarily want to turn their revolution over to youthful activists.

Since the Egyptian and Tunisian revolutions, what journalists have dubbed “unrest” has spread to Syria, Bahrain, Morocco, Yemen – to nearly every corner of the world’s largest authoritarian oasis. In Tunisia, Egypt and Yemen. Their calls for justice will prove to be irresistible in the long run. Even if Assad survives another year, or another five, his mandate is over, as is the mandate of dictatorship across the region.

In Tunisia and Egypt, and perhaps soon in Tripoli, Damascus and Manama, across an Arab world whose people have for so long been denied dignity, voice and representation, governments will now rise and fall according to the dictates of politics and circumstance.

To be sure, these new leaders will face enormous, perhaps insurmountable, economic and social challenges. But Arabs will now be led by elected representatives rather than by tyrants. Parties will squabble over the proper role of Islam in public life, and politicians will accuse one another of perfidy and betrayal.

Revolutionary coalitions that survived tenaciously during the period of transition will fall tumultuously apart under the strain of real politics. Such struggles are often considered desultory in longstanding democratic societies, where individuals long been denied dignity, voice and representation.

But here these convulsions will be beautiful, precisely for how extraordinary they will be. For unlike Khaled Said and Mohamed Bouazizi, Arab governments will finally be allowed to die of natural causes. They will die in their political sleep, after peaceful transitions, and sometimes they will die suddenly in disgrace, in votes of no-confidence and scandal. And those will be, at last, deaths worth celebrating.

David Farsi received his PhD in Political Science from the University of Pennsylvania in 2010, and his BA from Drew University in 2000. His scholarly work has been published in Arab Media & Society, Middle East Policy, Technology & Politics Review, and the forthcoming Routledge Handbook of Participatory Culture. He is the author of Dissent and Revolution in a Digital Age: Social Media, Blogging and Activism in Egypt, forthcoming from I.B. Tauris and Co., which explains how digital activists helped end Egyptian authoritarianism. He also serves as a strategy advisor and blogger for the Meta-Arbitration Project, which seeks to build foundational knowledge about digital activism. At Roosevelt, he teaches Introduction to Political Science, Comparative Democratization, Power and Politics in the Middle East, Egyptian Politics, International Relations of the Middle East, Terrorism and Political Violence, and Mobiles and Mobilization: Global Digital Activism. He is a frequent contributor to Egypt’s leading English-language newspaper, The Daily News Egypt. You can contact David Farsi at dfarsi@roosevelt.edu.