

# Sultan Al Qassemi The Egyptophile!

By Wessam Sherif

***"I believe that I was on the right side of history, even if it looked for a few days that I wasn't"- Sultan Al Qassemi***

***He's in love with everything about Egypt, he's as optimistic as they come and he's a very trusted source of news on Twitter due to his impartial coverage during the Tunisian and the Egyptian revolutions. In fact, his tweets are considered by Time as one the best 140 feeds!***

***And I'm personally glad that he chose to be on that side of history.***

**CAMPUS: So how did it all start?**

**Sultan:** In January when I had a disagreement with my publication, I had a lot of free time on my hands and it was just then that Bou Azizi had passed away on the fifth of January. So, there were a lot of statements coming in English and French being circulated and I thought that it would be interesting to translate what was being said. It was completely spontaneous and I did not plan it in any way.





For example, I translated the hilarious speech given by Gaddafi in which he referenced the “Bookface” after Ben Ali fled. The thing is, when news agencies broadcasted this speech they’d say “Gaddafi warns of dissent”, but there’s a lot of fun stuff that he said that they missed and there was also scary stuff. It sounds insane, but some people were actually interested in the absurdities that he was saying and I was actually laughing while I was typing the tweets.

At the time I had around 3 to 4 thousand followers and I wasn’t checking the mentions because I was so caught up in typing that I managed to find a way of saving seconds; I was actually told that I was tweeting every 40 seconds! By the end of the two hour speech, however, my followers had tripled! And when I went over some of the mentions (300 - 400 mentions) I found people saying “follow this man, he’s translating the mad dog’s speech”, including journalists. And that’s how it happened.

**C: What about Egypt’s revolution?**

**S:** I’m an Egyptophile, I love Egypt! I was actually here two weeks before the revolution but I left before it began. Around that time I took time off from work and I was on the internet 24 hours a day, I slept 2 and half hours at night and took maybe a half an hour break because there was so much happening and I had to capture it all!

**C: And can you sense a difference between Egypt before and after the revolution?**

**S:** There’s a huge difference! There’s so much more pride; Egyptians have always been proud, but now there’s all these pronouncements, you feel that people are walking confidently. And I think that I have come to Egypt at a time where these sentiments have been repressed a little bit but if I had come a month or two after the revolution I would have felt them even more. Nevertheless, I do feel that change since the moment I arrived at the airport; media now can make fun of anybody. And this phenomenon is only available in two countries in the Arab world; Tunisia and Egypt.

**C: But do you not see that only a certain niche of society still follows the revolution whereas a lot of people are still in love with SCAF just like they used to be in love with Mubarak?**

**S:** I think that the Egyptians are not in love with SCAF, the Egyptians are proud of their army, which they should be because while you might have corrupt elements with the ranks but the army itself commands a lot of respect from Egyptians, even from those who are against SCAF. However, according to Jack Shenker of the Guardian, there are elements who’ve been trained, brainwashed and given huge compensations (LE 200 a day) to suppress protests. They are not representative of the half a million to one million members of the Egyptian army, plus, the army means stability and a lot of Egyptians want stability. But that doesn’t necessarily mean that they’re happy with the military rule. Obviously, some think that the power transition process is too slow, taking Tunisia as a reference, but remember that Egypt is ten times bigger than Tunisia. So, if the handover to civilian rule happens by next summer, which is 8-9 months after Tunisia, it is still not so bad. The skepticism here revolves around the word ‘if’; if the handover is complete.

**C: Which of the presidential candidates do you think has the biggest chances of winning?**

**S:** I don’t think anyone can predict. Between the Brotherhood and between SCAF, someone would be elected that is acceptable to both sides. Perhaps Abo El Fotouh who is the most popular candidate I came across here in Egypt; I spoke to atheists, I spoke to Christians and I spoke to Muslims and his name kept getting mentioned without

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anybody actually dissing him outright, unlike some other politicians. So if he can mend ties with the Brotherhood and give assurances to SCAF he stands a strong chance. Also, Ahmed Shafiq could become popular once again, which would be the irony of all ironies.

El Baradei stands no chance.

In any case, whoever gets elected president isn’t the most important person, what happens after that is more important. Egypt is not a democracy yet and I think that it would become one not before two or three cycles, so we’re looking at another dozen years. That’s when you’d feel that the country is on the safe base, because now people have been told who to vote for now during the parliamentary elections but I believe that we’ll see less and less of that in the future. I think that the Muslim Brotherhood should be given a chance to fail; the right to fail shouldn’t be taken away from them. So by the next elections people will hopefully vote less with their hearts and more with their minds.





**C: What about state media, has it at all changed after the revolution?**

**S:** The policy hasn't changed, but the rhetoric has. For example, if you become president, they'll use Maspero to praise you, that's part of their manifesto. So, the next day after Mubarak was toppled was just another working day! The statistic that I heard claims that there are 40,000 people working for state media! Why such a large number? I know friends who work in Maspero who tell me that in the worst cases it is only the top department bosses who get replaced, then his/her assistant takes their place. Which is a continuation of the same culture.

**C: On the other hand we have a guy like Tawfik Okasaha.**

**S:** I think he's popular just because of the controversy that he makes. In all countries there are right wingers, so it's only natural for a country of 80-90 million people to have right wing elements. I'd be surprised if there was no Tawfik Okasha! He plays a role and for me that is to provide very entertaining comedy, but for other people he plays a more sinister role; a lot of people are gullible and they believe him. Nevertheless, he doesn't provide any education; he only provides entertainment that looks like politics. People will see through this, I don't know how long that will take though, plus there will always be fringe elements that agree with him and you have to accept this.

But here's an interesting story, the other day I was at the Mubarak trial, and Al Fara'een journalist was chased out by around a hundred people of the anti-Mubarak attendees. He just walked in towards the anti-Mubarak side very confidently trying to interview people and the second they saw the name of Al Fara'een on the microphone they chased him out!

**C: Did anything else of significance happen at the trial?**

**S:** What we learned yesterday at the trial is that the defense lawyer wanted to include the Maspero, Mohamed Mahmoud and the Occupy Cabinet clashes in the case to show that people have been killed even after Mubarak's time, so you can't put all the blame on him.

**C: So did tweeting get you in any trouble?**

**S:** Well, I was warned of visiting a number of countries, including Egypt, but I eventually visited them all. Also, during the police withdrawal in Egypt, I tweeted that there was no police presence in a certain area in Cairo and a friend of mine, who works in a mall in that area, called me and told me to stop tweeting because he was scared that people would come and attack them. So, I tweeted that a friend of mine called me and told me to stop. I didn't stop, though, because hundreds of people asked me not to. As a result, I got into a disagreement with my friend. Because while I do understand that he could be in danger, there are people who had family going to that place and they were in peril, so I had to keep disseminating the information. Later though, my friend sent me an email thanking me for ignoring him.

At the end of the day I believe that I was on the right side of history, even if it looked for a few days that I wasn't.

**C: And we're thankful for your presence during the revolution.**

**S:** I did nothing; it just became an interesting story how someone who wasn't in the country was able to - on a very miniscule atomic level - feel as though he was part of this. Everywhere I go since I got here I get invited to drinks, to parties and people are very friendly!

**C: Are you single?**

**S:** Yes, I am.

**C: Well there's your chance then!**

**S:** (Laughs) Honestly though, this past week in Egypt was the best week of my life. I actually tweeted it; there's Egypt and there's the rest of world! **C**

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