have been possible if it weren't for the revolution and my active participation in it. I am finally able to follow my dreams, and now I have a job. Through my travels my life's direction has become clear. Living in Egypt is now a choice, and I choose it everyday.

As 2011 comes to a close lots of things are yet to change in Egypt, but on New Year's Eve I know what my toast will be for myself and for my country. I am going to praise and even brag about my country, the amazing year behind me AND hope for next year to be even better.

Egypt the Country, the People, the Idea. Live-Tweeting a Revolution.
by Sultan Al Qassemi

For those who had faith, it was always meant to be so. It couldn't be the fate of Arabs to forever live under oppressive regimes, and it shouldn't be. The Arab uprisings started from none other than Tunisia, the seat of the Arab Council of Arab Interior Ministers who are responsible for monitoring their populations, and one of the world's worst police states. It was ironic, but it was also very fitting. The collapse of the Tunisian regime was a message to all Arab dictators that sooner or later, no matter how hard they try to oppress their populations, they will not be able to stand in the face of destiny.

Like millions of young Arabs, I was very fortunate to be part of this phenomenon,

mainly thanks to the wonders of technology. Just five days before the death of Mohammed Bouazizi, the man who self-immolated himself and one of the major Arab icons of the uprisings, I had finished my term as chair of a pan-Arab non-profit organisation whose mandate was to empower youth. Despite numerous calls for me to continue as chair I decided to set an example and leave the post after my term expired (a concept that is foreign to our region's leaders).

The day before Bouazizi died I wrote my last article for The National in Abu Dhabi. It began with the following: "The Arabs are a patient lot. Twenty years after a wave of democracy swept through Eastern Europe, Arabs are still waiting for their own wave. In the past few weeks a series of setbacks have pushed their dreams even further away. They haven't lost hope though, as the latest protests in Tunisia have demonstrated."

As Um Kalthoum, one of Egypt's most beloved songbirds, famously sang, "patience has a limit." When Bouazizi died the next day, it was clear to me that this would be a monumental event that would not go unnoticed. I tweeted "Avenue Mohammed Bouazizi 1986-2011". A few weeks after Ben Ali was toppled the authorities did in fact name a road after Bouazizi.

I continued to tweet speeches and updates from Tunisia, a small country I had never been to before, until Ben Ali fled. Tunisia is far removed from the geo-political challenges of the Arabian Gulf and yet I was so proud of its people, along with millions of Arabs who had also rallied to show their support.

A few days after Ben Ali fled the country he had ruled with an iron fist for decades, many of us were struggling to fully come to terms with the end of one Arab dictator. I had returned to Sharjah, my home emirate, from a night out in Dubai. It was around midnight and the Arabic satellite news channels were carrying breaking news that a statement was forthcoming from another Arab dictator, Libya's Muammar Gaddafi. Online social media

forums carried reports of a security build up in Benghazi and along the Tunisian border.

A few minutes later, the “King of Arab Kings” and “Dean of African and Arab leaders”, as Gadhafi refers to himself, appeared on TV live and started criticizing the Tunisians on what he saw to be their “audacity”.

“You’re lucky to have had a leader like Ben Ali”, “What did he ever do to you?” “You should wish for him to come back,” he said.

I opened my laptop and started live-tweeting. Those days I had well under 10,000 followers, a number that I was and continue to be very grateful for. Trying to live-tweet Gadhafi’s tirade was anything but easy. He spoke in colloquial Libyan; some words I did not understand, so I had to look them up online. I was tweeting with such fervor that my fingers began to feel numb.

“Don’t believe ‘bookface’” he said, referring to the social networking website Facebook. “Don’t believe what you read on Keleeeks” in reference to the WikiLeaks---diplomatic cables on Tunisia that were released in early December, exposing government corruption and foreign collusion, which many credit with building the critical momentum needed amongst intellectuals in order to oust the Tunisian dictator. Although it was winter, I was getting hot, laughing intermittently and tweeting away. Occasionally I would press the Twitter’s Mention button and see tweets to me that read “Check out this guy @sultanalqassemi, he’s tweeting mad-dog Gadhafi”, while others said “For some comedy you must read what Gaddafi is saying now via @sultanalqassemi’s timeline”. Journalists, diplomats, writers and most importantly regular folks, Arab and non-Arab, started to follow and retweet me, sharing my tweets with their followers.

It wasn’t in any reflection an interest in me, but rather in what was happening in the Arab world. By the end of that night my followers had increased exponentially. One friend calculated that throughout Gaddafi’s rambling speech I tweeted on average once every 45

seconds.

A few days later, Egyptian social media was abuzz with a possible protest on the national "police day", January 25, a day that Egypt celebrates the police force's resistance against British foreign occupation. I had followed the tragic case of martyr Khaled Said, another icon of the Arab people's emancipation movement. Egypt's Khaled and Tunisia's Mohammed could not have anticipated the tsunami that would be unleashed upon their martyrdom. In their deaths, a few months apart, more has resulted to change the face of their nations and the Arab world than in several decades combined. I still recall that photo, published in June 2010 in The National, of brave young Egyptians standing in Alexandria, wearing black from top to bottom to mark their protestation. The group included Muslims and Copts, liberals and socialists, standing together. They stood a few feet apart on the beautiful Mediterranean coastline of Egypt's second largest city. I have yet to see that photo since then, and yet it lingers in the back of my mind. To see it, all I need to do is shut my eyes and there it is.

It was the most dignified protest I have ever seen. In order to bypass the draconian martial law imposed almost throughout Egypt's military dictatorships since the 1950's, intelligent Egyptians made sure not to chant or gather in large groups so as to avoid persecution. As I have noted in openDemocracy, at this protest the people knew why they were there and so did everybody else. That is what ultimately mattered most, that people knew why they were there even if they were not causing a ruckus. A momentum was swelling, one that translated into more and more people joining the "*El Shaheed*" (martyr) page (as the "We are all Khaled Said" Facebook page has become known in Arabic).

I felt compelled to continue covering the Egyptian uprising, so I took time off from work. I didn't know what would happen, all I knew was that this was essential for me, as a secularist, as a liberal, but most importantly as an Arab. I have been writing for years about

empowering young Arabs to determine their own fate, and in Egypt I found my raison d'être. After all, I was in Egypt merely a few weeks before the uprising on January 25. Egypt is where I chose in 2002 to take my sister and her kids on their first break after her husband passed away, because I knew it so well. Egypt was the land from where all the music, the films and TV shows that I grew up on had come from. Egypt was the hope; and home away from home.

Egypt was for me larger than its 85 million inhabitants or one million square kilometres. Egypt is an idea. There was a sense of responsibility towards it, towards this land whose sons travelled to fight for the Gulf in 1991. A debt that must be repaid, as I wrote for Al Jazeera. Free these sons, let them and Egypt's daughters enjoy the freedom and dignity they have been denied. When #Jan25 (as the uprising was called on Twitter) started, it was my chance to take part. I knew it then, in my gut, this was no ordinary protest, this was no ordinary country, these were no ordinary people. I tweeted my heart out, translating, switching like lightening between channels, breaking the news, relaying anecdotes from the ground when the internet access was shut down.

"Noor DSL is still working" I recall tweeting, referring to Egypt's internet service provider.

I eventually met Noor DSL's CEO and founder, as I have met all the activists and intellectuals who to me were truly heroes. When I flew into Cairo towards the end of 2011, I tweeted "Meeting the Egyptian activists is like meeting the characters from your favourite novel". They were the protagonists of the revolution.

On one afternoon during the 18-day revolution, my friend Bassam, who had been with me in school, called me and told me to stop tweeting because I was "spreading panic". I tweeted that. "You have a lot of followers here," he said. My followers on Twitter had already grown to over 25,000 by then. Among them, many urged me to ignore Bassam. "Don't listen

to him, we need to know what's going on." I wasn't alone. Many others were also doing what I was doing. But the bravest of us all were those on the streets in Cairo. Most were tweeting in Arabic and others in English, but few had access to the multiple TV channels and web portals, Arabic and English, that I had. Some of these portals were subscription based and I had a password from work through which I could access the latest news and tweet it.

I tweeted "I'm going to apologise to my friend and turn him down."

Bassam told me, "I saw your tweet!" I apologised once again to him and shut the phone off and returned to my laptop. I felt confident that my tweets were not gossip or rumours. When Habib A. Adly, Egypt's despised Interior Minister, withdrew the police from the streets, it was announced live on TV, and in the crucial minutes after the announcement, the dissemination of this information to the people meant the difference between safety and danger. Most activists were on the streets and they did not know that there would be no police to keep things under control.. One tweet I recall vividly was "Thank you for letting me know the police are no longer in the street, I will warn my sisters who are out to come back home." In other instances, thugs (known as Baltagiya in Egyptian or axe-wielders from the original Turkish word) roamed the street, many loyal to Mubarak and his cronies. More dangerous still were the prisoners who had fled their cells, prompting civilian neighbourhood-protection committees to form along the streets of non-commercial districts. As the uprising spread beyond Cairo the names of the towns became more known to me. I tweeted estimated sizes of each protest, population of the town, the location, the distance from Cairo in kilometres and miles and as many anecdotes as I felt I could provide to offer context to the revolution.

Some have long assumed that those of us who come from the Gulf were not sympathetic to political progress, to reform or to change. But this was our chance, too. Many other Gulf social media bloggers and activists started writing and supporting those in Egypt. I maintained, as much as I could, an objective eye by reporting news rather than commenting

on it. Mubarak spoke on several occasions, with many of us hoping that he would step down, but he didn't. In those instances, I may have let a few tweets loose that included some "adult" language. I remember going to visit my cousin and discovering something called *Trendsmap*. Apparently my name was trending in North America, South America, Western Europe and in some parts of East Asia as well as the Arab world. It was clear to me that the world had a vested interest in what was unfolding rapidly in the streets of Egypt. For weeks on end, I was up for 20 hours a day, translating and typing.

I became online "friends" with dozens, scores and perhaps even hundreds of people in a short period of time. Cultivating relationships online, and then eventually in the tangible world. When Wael Ghonim, the famed internet activist and Google employee, was released after 11 days in detention that felt more like 11 weeks to us, that was the moment, the pinnacle of my emotional surge. I was tweeting his interview on Dream TV (the New York Times used my translation in their coverage), happy he was out and uncertain about how things would develop in these crucial days. In the end the TV presenter played a video with all the faces of the martyred protesters and asked him "Was his worth it?" Wael broke down crying, and so did I. There I was, thousands of kilometres away, in my lowly-lit room in Sharjah, not far from where Wael administrated the El Shaheed page (in the UAE). I shed tears partly because of what I saw but also because of the build-up of emotions that I had experienced over the last few weeks. Reading endlessly about Egypt, interviews with martyrs' mothers, sisters, fathers and brothers. "I want my son back, bring him back to me" said numerous mothers dressed in black. I still recall one mother's face as she wept in her house in one of Cairo's many poor neighbourhoods. But he'll never be back, and the best that could happen would be for this evil empire that was run by the NDP to end and for a system based on bread, freedom and social justice (as per the slogan of the Egyptian uprisings) to take its place.

As the uprisings spread from country to county, I eventually would have to return to

the “real world”, my life and my commitments. I still would spend the next week reporting on and sympathising with what transpired in Yemen, Libya, Syria, Bahrain and elsewhere but I could not offer the same level of dedication I gave to Tunisia and then to Egypt to these equally just causes.

Over a year after Mubarak’s ouster, I remain hopeful. Despite the political setbacks and politicking, despite the numerous challenges and those plotting to hijack what brave young Egyptians did with their own hands, I remain hopeful. Today, for us in the Gulf, it is crucial for the Egyptian uprising to be completed and finally turn into a revolution. For the leadership to change, for the laws to change, for the mentality of those governing it to change. Egyptians, Arabs and the rest of the world must remain optimistic. As I view the developments in the Gulf, from the social media McCarthyism I have written about to the rise of the Islamists, some of whom threaten to scale back our freedoms, I am reminded that, if Egypt succeeds it will be better for all of us. If Egypt succeeds we will have a new dominant standard of freedom that we can look up to and emulate. We can show those in the Gulf that Islam and freedom can co-exist, that it need not be authoritarianism or chaos. But for all of us to succeed, Egypt, the mother of the world, as it is referred to in Arabic, must succeed first. Egypt the country, Egypt the people, Egypt the idea.