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The Arab Spring And The Toponymic Changes Arab Spring - Toponymic Spring?

Submitted by the Arabic Division**

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Summary

This paper addresses the toponymic issues due to the Arab Spring. It analyzes the impact of the Arab Spring on the management of place names and the recorded changes in general and the new names whether spontaneous or official in particular.

If the names in the past depended only on the characteristics of space, nowadays, they are partly linked to the political systems. Generally it is the name of the nation' leader who is first attributed to the locations and the most prominent buildings, then come 'the fathers of the nation' and other dignitaries of the system as well as the major events showing the great achievements of the regime. Arab countries, in general, have not escaped this approach.

What about the Arab revolutions? Did the Arab Spring create a new toponymy? If so, is it formal or spontaneous? What are the essential features of this toponymy? How the official authorities have reacted to this spontaneous toponymy which sometimes have consequences on the international level.

This is what this paper will try to answer.

THE ARAB SPRING AND THE TOPONYMIC CHANGES ARAB SPRING - TOPONYMIC SPRING?

By

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INTRODUCTION

Throughout history man has felt the need to appropriate space in order, particularly to be able to move and orient himself.

He has also given names to limit, isolate, identify, distinguish, demarcate and mainly to assert a right to a place.

By the denomination, he situated the other, the one who can, who has or does not have.

It is indeed by the word denomination, that we own 'the social thing', we own the space, set out its boundaries, identify it, individualize it in relation to others; it is also by the name that one belongs to him.

Place names not only allow the tracking and the identification of locations but also they inform about the function of different named spaces. It is the use of space and its dominant feature that determined the assigned name.

The names were the result of practical and spontaneous use, product of popular imagination. It was the use of places which determined the allocation of names.

These names can be described as vernacular names.

The privilege of assigning names did not yet belong to the administration. The support of assigning names and also, of their change was not the responsibility of political authorities.

If in ancient times, man used the nature to name his space without any political connotation, in modern times, the act of naming and changing names becomes under the control of the governments.

Denomination is now bearing a message that delivers a society' vision, perpetuates a memory, honors, glorifies, claims, requires, values, vehicles values and information on socio-economic, socio-political and socio-cultural projects.

The man or the societies are no longer, as in the past, the masters of the choice of place names where they live, they no longer have the privilege to name by themselves. From spontaneous creators of place names they have become simple users.

This is the political power of the moment, which in principle on behalf of the people, appoints and denominates.

Below we will analyze the impact of the Arab Spring on the management of place names in general and on the recorded changes and new names in particular, whether they are spontaneous or official.

THE ARAB SPRING: A SPONTANEOUS OR OFFICIAL REDENOMINATION OF THE SPACE?

If the names in the past depended only on the characteristics of space, nowadays, they are linked with the political systems. Generally it is the name of the nation' leader who is first attributed to the locations and the most prominent buildings, then come 'the fathers of the nation' and other dignitaries of the system as well as the major events showing the great achievements of the regime.

What about the Arab revolutions? Did the Arab Spring create a new toponymy? If so, is it formal or spontaneous? What are the essential features of this toponymy? How the official authorities have reacted to this spontaneous toponymy which sometimes have consequences on the international plan as it will be discussed below?

This is what we will try to address in the following and try to bring some clarifications to these issues.

It should be noted at the outset that almost all spontaneous changes of registered names consist of street names with political connotation in relation with the old regime.

What is the status of these odonyms? Can the popular' will impose, to the legal authorities or to those temporary, the new names that emerged from an exceptional context?

POLITICAL INSTABILITY- TOPONYMIC INSTABILITY?

During and following the Arab revolutions we have witnessed many attempts to change the names mainly of streets, squares and public buildings, bearing the names of persons associated with the challenged political regimes.

Because of the political instability, the toponymy was a contributing factor and a dynamic player. In fact, it was during the events that these changes have occurred; these changes took place in a spontaneous way without any interference by political authorities. The political authorities have to follow and sometimes formalize the choice of the population but because also, they often did not endorse this choice for various reasons among others is the fact that the person that the population wanted to honor, doesn't deserve as much honor or the chosen street or building does not fit the stature of this person.

To support our purpose we will take examples from countries that have respectively led revolutions, Tunisia, Egypt and Libya.

IN TUNISIA:

As we all know, the Arab Spring has been triggered by the attempted suicide by self-immolation on 17TH December, 2010 and death on 4th January 2012 of the Tunisian street vendor Mohamed Bouazizi.

After his death and the fall of the regime of Ben Ali in Tunisia, the population proceeded to the renaming of the central square of his village, Sidi Bouzid, by giving it its name.

During the riots of 14th January 2011, the name « Place 7 November » in reference to-date symbol of the seizure of power by the former president Zine Al Abidine Ben Ali on 7th November 1987 and symbolizing the main place of the capital, was demolished from the panel by the citizens and replaced by the name of Mohamed Bouazizi. It was only a spontaneous and temporary situation as the 17th February 2011, the municipality of Tunis announced in a release to rebaptize that place, « Place 14 January; 2011 »

, date of the fall of the regime of Ben Ali who left the country the same day, and to replace « Boulevard 7 November » by « Boulevard Mohamed Bouazizi » .

The statement issued by the municipality of Tunis states that this decision is part of the memory of the popular revolution that overthrew the old regime.



Before : « Place 7 novembre »

Now : « Place 14 Janvier 2011 »



Boulevard Mohamed Bouazizi (ex Boulevard 7 Novembre)

The fallout from the Tunisian revolution on the names of avenues, streets and squares has reached several places in Tunisia. In cities like Djerba, Sousse, Sfax, Ezzahra and others , all places and streets bearing the name “7 Novembre” have been changed to either “Place 14 Janvier 2011” or “Place Revolution 14 Janvier” or for streets to “Avenue 14 Janvier” .

On the other hand, the 25th Mars 2011, the Tunisian Post has indeed issued a stamp bearing the image of late Bouazizi.



At the international level, the Paris City Council has also decided to use the name of Mohamed Bouazizi to name one of its places in the 14th arrondissement of Paris, in honour of the Tunisian people and the revolution of January 14th-2011.



The Mayor of Paris in the presence of the mother of Mohamed Bouazizi, at the inauguration of "the place Mohamed Bouazizi", the 30th June 2011

Also places where martyrs of the revolution lost their lives were renamed after them. Those acts were initiated by the revolution 'committees created during the revolution by the citizens themselves to protect their own cities.



A place name bearing the name of a martyr of the 14 January' revolution

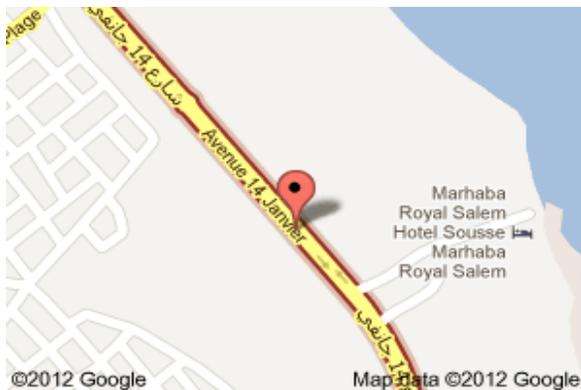
Other changes have also affected the place names during the revolution like the removal from road panels or others, of the semantic part of some names in relation with the ancient regime like « Mosque Al Abidine » in reference to the fallen president « Zine Al Abidine Ben Ali ».



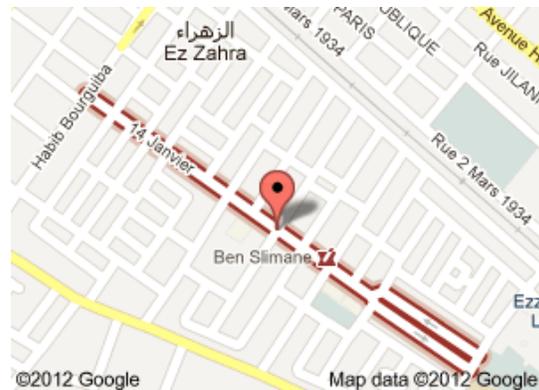
Road panel previously indicating the Mosque Al Abidine

It should be noted that, places, streets and edifices named or re-named spontaneously during the revolution by the population are still unofficial and those, whose old names have no link with Ben Ali' regime, are still officially bearing their formal official names.

Of course the revolution had also its impact on the international companies' producers and users of the geographical names like Google maps. The following are some examples showing how Google maps has in some cities like Sousse and Ezzahra used either official or crowd sourced data to update its maps according to the 14th January revolution' changes, but not yet in others like Zaghouan where one of the main streets is still bearing the name : "Avenue 7 Novembre".



Sousse : Avenue 14 Janvier (ex Avenue 7 Novembre)



Ezzahra : Avenue 14 Janvier (ex Avenue 7 Novembre)



Sidi Bouzid: Boulevard Med Bouazizi



Zaghuan: Avenue 7 Novembre

There were conflicting views about the changing of names during the revolution and the attribution of new ones. Some approved the adoption of the name of “Mohammed Bouazizi”, others preferred the name “Boulevard 14 Janvier 2011” arguing that the revolution is the revolution of an entire people, not of a unique person. Others liked to replace the name of “Place 7 Novembre” by “Place des Martyrs de la Révolution du 14 Janvier 2011”. The idea of the “Unknown Martyr”, like the “Unknown Soldier” was also considered.

Others, while remaining optimistic about the future of Tunisia, were wondering: What if one day we would again have to change the name of this place to give it another date? And therefore suggested most symbolic names’ selection that may withstand all the vicissitudes of history.

IN LIBYA:

Like what happened in Tunisia, the population in Libya has also proceeded in a spontaneous way to rename the streets, places, buildings, etc...

However, the country's authorities, represented by the National Transitional Council, did not recognize these changes and therefore issued a Decree banning the change of names, except those directly related to the old regime, such as the localities, streets, buildings, schools, hospitals, universities etc...

As example of universities ‘names, “ Al Fatah University” , in reference to the 1st September 1969 date where the late Lybian leader Moammar Kaddafi seized power, became Tripoli University'

“Al Fatah Street” resumed its former name of the days of royalty: “Al Istiqlal Street”. “Al Fatah Tower” became “Tripoli Tower” and the “Green Square” was renamed back to “Square of Martyrs ”, etc.

“1st September street” became “24th December Street” in reference to December 24, 1951 date of independence of Libya.

IN EGYPT:

According to the website (El Masreen) 682 streets, 21 institutes and 315 schools were named after the former president and most of them in Luxor, Kafr El-Sheikh and Sohag, Cairo and Beni Suef, Assiut, Minya, El Sharkya, Menoufia and El Buhayra. In addition there are 57 streets and 245 schools named after his wife Susan, 15 streets and 18 schools named after his son Jamal Mubarak and finally seven pilot schools were named after his grandson Mohammad Ala Mubarak.

After the revolution of 25th January, like in Tunisia and in Lybia, people wanted to change the names that remind them Mubarak and his regime. The Cairo court issued then a ruling to remove the name of former President Hosni Mubarak, of his wife Suzanne Mubarak and his family from all streets and public squares, facilities, government institutions, public libraries and wherever those names are found. The Court emphasized in its ruling that this corrupted family does not deserve any honor from Egyptian people because of their economic and political corruption and for having manipulated the destiny of the Egyptian people.

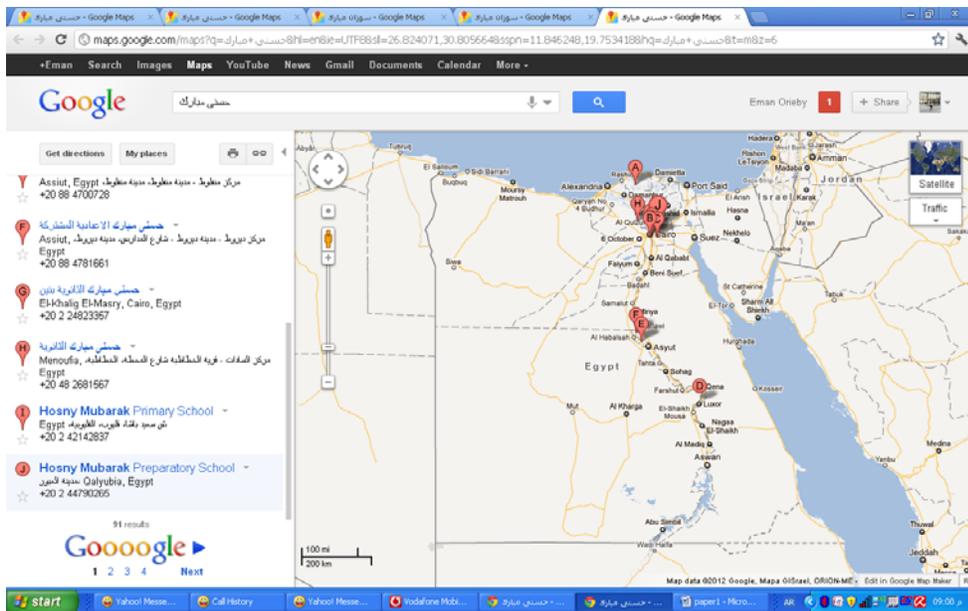
According to that ruling the toponyms were changed by authorities to new names reflecting the spirit of revolution, including "revolution of 25th January", "Thawrat Khamsa wa Ishreen Yanayir", "Tahrir", "El-Shohada". Also names of the martyrs of the revolution who scarified their lives were given to the places where they lived and finally names of famous figures of Egypt like Zwayl and Farouk El-Baz were also adopted.

Examples from different governorates:

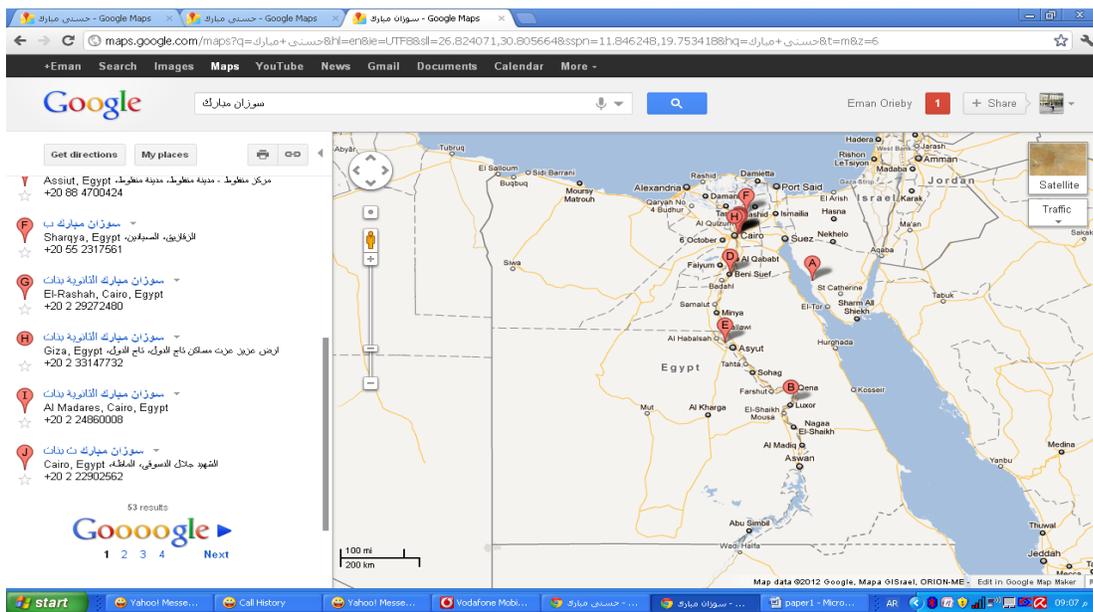
Cairo:

The metro station which older name is "Husni Mubark" Changed by authority to "El Shohada" (which means martyrs).

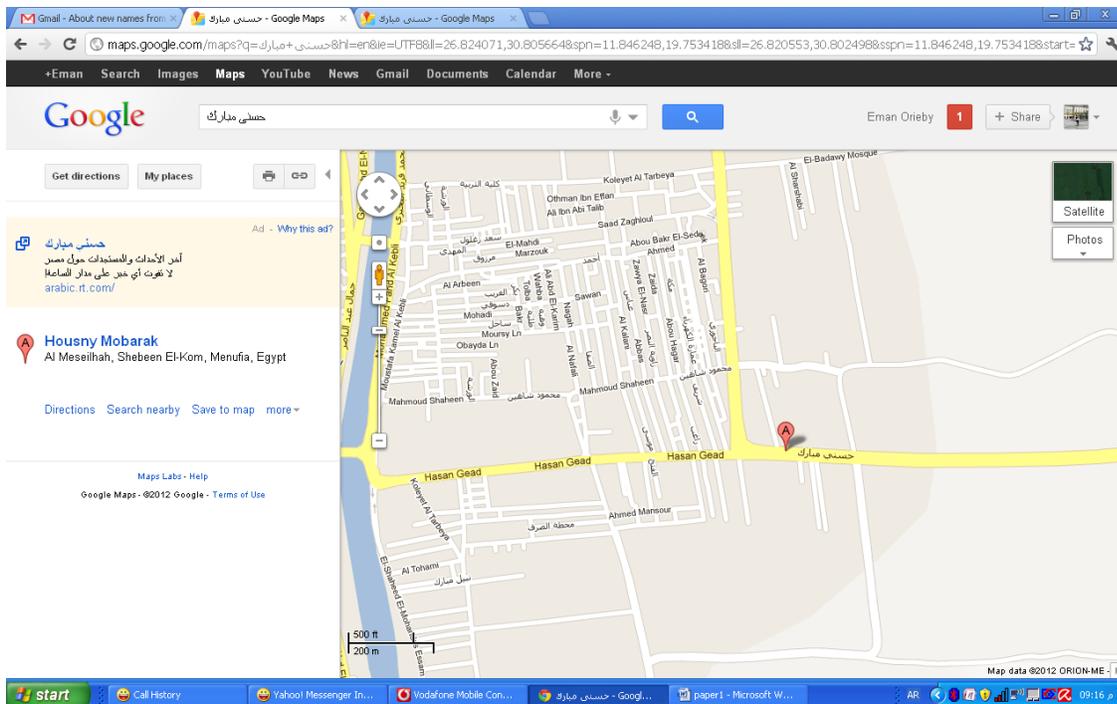




Search for Husni Mubark in Google maps Window in 17/3/2012



Search for Suzan Mubark in Google maps Window in 17/3/2012



Google maps 27/3/2012 The Husni Mubark street has not been changed to Osama Alaam Street on Google maps.

THE NEW GEOGRAPHICAL NAMES AND THEIR USE AT THE INTERNATIONAL LEVEL

Some organizations and international institutions including private ones have begun using the new names on their sites like Google.

It is then recommended :

- To remind that according to the texts and principles of the United Nations Group of Experts on the Standardization of Geographical Names, a name is official only once it is standardized by a duly recognized authority “an **official name** is a toponym sanctioned by a legal constituted (e.g national) name authority and applied within jurisdiction” and “a **name standardized** is a name sanctioned by a name authority as the preferred name from among a number of allonyms for a given feature”. However, a single feature may have more than one standardized name.

To stay conform with the principles of the international standardization of geographical names, the UNGEGN should then draw the attention of the crowd sourcing data agencies to have consultation with the national mapping agencies in order to provide them with official and pertinent data.

- For countries who don't have yet toponymic authorities, to speed the setting up of those bodies in order to regulate the geographical names sectors and to preserve as maximum as possible the normalisation of the geographical names either when assigning new names or changing others.
- The Assigning of names is a political decision; it is also the echo of people's aspirations and feelings who are occupying those places. It should be then a mutual decision between the politicians and population based on agreement and not on conflict.

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