**Interview with Laila Soueif**

**2014**

**TAPE 1**

**Nicola Pratt:** Can I ask you when and where you were born?

**Laila Soueif:** I was actually born in London because my mother was doing her PhD there at the time in 1956 when I was born, but I don’t remember anything about that particular stage. She came back to Cairo when I was only two having finished the PhD, and I grew up in Cairo, I’m very Cairene. Yeah, I grew up in Cairo and lived most of my life in Cairo. I sometimes went abroad when my parents were doing the sabbatical or something. And later when I became (inaudible 0:00:50:2) doing my PhD and so on but on the whole, I lived almost entirely in Cairo

**NP:** What did your parents do?

**LS:** they were university professors, both of them. My father still is a professor actually at the faculty of arts. My mother passed away a few years ago, but she was a professor of English literature.

**NP:** Do you have any memories, what memories do you have from your childhood of political events that happened whether nationally or regionally?

**LS:** Let me say that 1967 happened when I was eleven. 1967 was the beginning of my starting to follow politics systematically. I have vague memories before that of the liberation of Algeria for instance, or stuff like that. But 1967 when I was eleven is when I actually started following politics and reading the papers more or less regularly and the news, and it is also because Nassir’s state was this very strong state. People did not talk politics in front of children. And this broke down completely after 67, so suddenly you had this (inaudible 0:02:51:0) of everyone talking politics in front of you, and your parents talking about things they would never have talked about, and their friends… so before 67 it was you know these big events where you felt sympathy with colonialist movements, anti-discrimination movements, stuff like that. You heard about them like that. I was certainly aware of that (inaudible 0:03:34:1) was murdered, I was aware that Martin Luther King was murdered, because these were big events, and because my parents were actually politically motivated, but that is very different from what it was like after 67.

**NP:** What was the mood in your household with regards to what was said about 67?

**LS:** There was a feeling of absolute catastrophe. Even my parents, as I discovered later, I hadn’t discovered it before, they were very sceptic about Nassir and about all this dictatorship and so on. But we all felt it as a national catastrophe and as… as defeat of what was, after all, an attempt at building a modern Egyptian state, a modern independent Egyptian state. So, we all felt it as an absolute catastrophe.

**NP:** What did you study?

**LS:** I’m a mathematician, I studied math. I always knew I was going to study math. I was one of those kids who enjoy math very much. I remember when my mother used to come in and find me doing math problems, she’d say “leave this and start studying”… She knew that this was my fun game not my real hard work studying. So I’m a mathematician, I studied math at Cairo university, and then I did post graduate (inaudible 0:05:52:5)…

**NP:** What year did you graduate?

**LS:** From the university, 1977.

**NP:** Whilst you were at university, did you participate in student…

**LS:** I was… I joined the university in the war of 73. It was after the bigger movements. Because already, what are called the movements of the seventies are actually 71 and 72. So I missed those, I was in high school, and these were very much related to the fact that students were pushing for war to liberate the Sinai from Israel. I went to the university after the war had happened and after things started getting sour. For the seventies generation, the war to liberate the Sinai was going to be the beginning of a resurrection of the Nasserist project without all of the oppression and the… but a state that is socialist oriented and nationalist oriented against colonialism, against the hegemony of the United States etc. the war happened and sort of came and went, and we went exactly the other way. At the same time, this strong nationalist movement which was the result of anger at the 67 defeat was deflated…

**NP:** Do you want to pause whilst we eat?

**LS:** Yeah, I think…

**NP:** so do you mean there was no student movement by the time you went to the university?

**LS:** No, there was a student movement but it was much weaker, and already the Islamist were staring to rise. Actually they were being encouraged by Sadat to get rid of Leftist, some Nasserists and so on. So these were the years when the Left was going down and the Islamists were coming up. But there was a student movement, and there was a movement against what Sadat was doing, it was getting a lot of resistance anyway, so whether it was the steps towards peace with Israel, or the steps towards what they called opening up the (inaudible 0:09:27:9). So… I was involved in all that, there was a Socialist club at the university and I was a member. There were underground organizations, I didn’t become a member of any of those.

**NP:** Sorry, which organizations?

**LS:** there were a number of Leftist underground organizations. , I didn’t become a member of any of those. I already… I already had the feeling the underground work was not the right… wasn’t good to get anywhere. And then there were these huge demonstrations that erupted at the beginning of 77, we call them the bread demonstrations. And it took us all by surprise, absolutely…

**NP:** Did you participate in those demonstrations?

**LS:** I participated, absolutely, yes, in these demonstrations until (inaudible 0:11:01:7) economic decisions that they brought them on, and the army started controlling and came down to (inaudible 0:11:12:0) and when we got back to university, I was one of the few activists who was (inaudible 0:11:20:9) actually, because I was this good student, so I wasn’t being a full time activist. I simply didn’t get (inaudible 0:11:34:6) that easily. I was like doing mathematics 75% of the time and activism 25%. Anyway, most of my friends were either in jail or on the run, so there was a lot to do to keep this thing going somehow and you have to keep track of those. But anyway, it didn’t last very long. Eventually, Sadat tried to calm things down. So everyone eventually came out… and I graduated.

**NP:** What did you do after you graduated?

**LS:** I immediately started working as an assistant in the university. I had a very fixed life. Since my graduation, I worked at Cairo University, I only went abroad for a few years to do my PhD, and I came back and worked at Cairo University. I’ve lived my life at Cairo University, which is actually how things are here, most people, most of my generation of university staff members are like that. They get a post as an assistant, then when they get their PhD, they get a permanent post, and that’s it. Except that most of my generation, they take 5 years off to work in Saudi Arabia to make some money, I never did that. So most of my generation have spent their careers between Cairo University of whichever university they have to be working in, and some Gulf university to make the money for the next 5 years, and so on.

**NP:** Why didn’t you travel to the Gulf and work?

**LS:** For one thing, I really didn’t want to unless I absolutely had to because I thought this was one of the things that was completely ruining our universities. It was like everyone was a temp. And I didn't have to because my mother had worked in the Gulf for 10 years so she could help everyone out with handouts and so on. She worked for the whole family, she worked in Saudi Arabia for 10 years, so she could help everyone. And also because unlike most of my colleagues, I married someone who was not a university member, and he was a political activist, and he was in jail, etc. so I had to stay around him, and after he came out of jail, he became a human rights lawyer. There’s no career in the Gulf for him. So really, on all levels, I neither wanted to do it nor felt like doing it nor absolutely had to do it nor was it being practical on a practical basis. I probably (inaudible 0:15:23:5).

**NP:** Did you participate in any sort of initiatives or activities or political parties after you graduated.

**LS:** Not political parties, but yeah, over the years, we formed various university groups… there was a group which aimed at sort of… we don’t have a syndicate or a union, but we do have what we call staff clubs. They were supposed to be social clubs but at that time, it was the only thing we got to elect. And they were completely under the sum of the university administration. So there was this movement to free them which we eventually managed to do and then handed them over to the Muslim Brotherhood. It was the first proper elections that we had and they won it.

**NP:** When was that?

**LS:** It was… about (inaudible 0:17:09:6) the list that we were backing won the election in 86, and two years later, the next elections, the Muslim brotherhood won. Actually what they did with the revolution; sort of let someone clear the way for us and then come in and win the next election is what they’ve been doing in every single election of (inaudible 0:17:46:5) whatever… so anyway, but they won the election fair and square and they kept winning it, so I must give them that. And immediately, there was a whole movement around it. But anyway, there were things that could deal… there were always things that could work with them on, like students being arrested, like some degree of academic freedom when it’s under attack from the state, not academic freedom when it’s under attack from Muslim (inaudible 0:18:40:3) that was one group, and there were also movements for the Palestinian cause and so on, and finally there was what we still have, what we call the university independence group which we formed in 2004, and which worked really hard on things like getting the police off the campus and the deans and the presidents should be elected and so on. I think because we managed to form a sort of consensus on this in the university, we did manage to push that through straight after the revolution. It was… getting the police off campus had already won a court case, and when the police disappeared after January 25, they never returned, there was no point in that. And getting the university deans and presidents of the university and heads of the departments and so on to be elected, there was an absolute consensus on that among university members or just activists and so on. It was one of the few reforms that we managed to push through the Parliament. It was elected for a short while and it was ready for signing and the notary council kept in in the freezer, and it was one of the first things that Morsi signed after he became president.

**NP:** When the government changed the law, it was the beginning of the nineties, so that university deans would no longer be elected, they would be appointed.

**LS:** Yeah.

**NP:** Was there resistance at universities?

**LS:** There was an attempt at resistance, but it didn’t… there was a failed attempt at resistance. We had this big conference where people would decide (inaudible 0:21:34:5) right around exam time so that the decision to strike would be a very difficult one to take. So anyway, there was this big conference where we took a decision not to strike, not to stop the exams but to delay the results. And then, there was pressure on everyone, and almost everyone folded. In my faculty, only like 8 of us… there were hundreds at that conference from my faculty and like 8 of us stuck to the decision. So the resistance simply folded.

**NP:** Was there pressure…

**LS:** There was very strong pressure

**NP:** coming from security, coming from the administration?

**LS:** There was peer pressure, there was pressure from security, there was… and also, at the time, the presidents of the university were not elected. It was only the dean. The university presidents had quite a lot of (inaudible 0:23:04:8) so they were the main source of pressure actually, the presidents of the university and the elected deans who were there, who were elected and were hoping to get appointed…

**NP:** So, there were various initiatives and attempts at resistance, but would you say that there was nothing really… that the strongest group emerged in 2003, the 9th of March?

**LS:** It was the strongest (inaudible 0:23:51:4)

**NP:** The most almost sustained.

**LS:** Yeah. It had the best stage power probably. I think for two reasons: one is that by 2003, it was becoming very obvious that the Muslim Brotherhood who were controlling the clubs, let’s say they were controlling the opposition, worked to a political agenda, so people don’t mind that, I assume, or they would’ve kicked them out. But there was a place for another kind of movement that worked on university issues regardless of the political position, and that’s the place that we often took, and at the same time, I mean… (inaudible 0:25:17:5) were moving all around the country, and March 9 was… started like a couple of months before “Kifaya” and there was already a change, and there was this feeling that you needed a different kind of resistance to the government… so that’s the one that had the most power to continue to be relevant at various times. It was always aware. Its small movement got all this prestige because it’s got… it’s like the human rights movement. The small movement because it’s got this reputation for being really straight and to the point (inaudible 0:26:31:0)

**NP:** Were you there at the founding of the movement?

**LS:** Yeah. I was one of the basically… so I was one of the founders (inaudible 0:27:03:2) there were like 20 people who started the first… I was one of them.

**NP:** Was it easy to get a consensus of the aims of the movement?

**LS:** Well, okay, let me put it this way, because there was so much state security interference in the universities, and because it was making everyone really pissed off, so the slogan itself (inaudible 0:27:50:8). In fact, in the actual workings, not every aim was… the aim of getting state security out of the university got consensus. But when it came to other issues like academic freedom against Islamist interference and so on, consensus would narrow… It would narrow but there would be other people who had not been very active, so on the whole, yeah, there was consensus on two of the main goals, which were to get state security out of universities, get councils to elect, university staff to elect the deans and presidents of the universities. I feel like the consensus was that the universities needed to be independent from the state.

**NP:** Were you surprised at the number of people who were attracted to the movement or did it seem normal at the time?

**LS:** No, the number wasn’t that big. The interesting thing was… how many people had kept themselves well away from the political type movements, were willing to invest in backing us, maybe not to invest in actually attending all our meeting but in backing us, in signing our petitions and so on… It was part of something that was happening all around the country in different ways. I mean… people were suddenly backing us. I remember that Ala’a at that time, not the same time exactly, he was starting this free software club or something, and you know they had a meeting in Al-Saqia and we publicized it. They were expecting like 50 people, and they got like a thousand…

TAPE 2

**LS:** There was something happening all around the country in that time. People were so sick of sitting around playing helpless that they were getting excited about any initiative particularly initiatives that didn’t look like they were completely political…

**NP:** Looking back, do you think that there was a particular impetus for this new mood in the country?

**LS:** Yeah. To me, this whole… the movement which had its highest point in the 25 January revolution started around 2000, actually with the first groups of solidarity with the Palestinian Intifada. I think the main thing was that people suddenly decided they were going to organize themselves publicly, and they were not going to seek permits to do that. This is the main feature, that people decided “Okay, this is it, I want to back the Palestinian Intifada. I want to organize and start collecting help and getting it to Gaza. I’m going to do that and I’m not going to try and hide that I’m doing that, and the government can do what it likes. I’m not going to try and get a government permit to do that, I’m just going to do it”. As far as I know, the first thing was… the best thing that was done in this way were the committees to back the Palestinian Intifada and it was out. I’m not going to look for a legal political party to give me cover, nothing, just do it. I think that was the main change and it sort of in a way to call. I think that’s why we suddenly had all this movement, because everyone realized that they could just do that and not waste time and energy and effort in trying to get around a bureaucratic maze which tells you what you’re allowed to do and what you’re not allowed to do. Partly of course, the technology helped. The fact that you could sit down and organize the meeting actually by e-mail. At the time, it was e-mail, there was no Facebook. You could do all the organizational stuff without actually having to meet physically, and so when you finally met physically, you were ready to work, not to waste time and get arrested or get thwarted or whatever… I think that’s how it went.

**NP:** And did you participate in other initiatives outside of…

**LS:** I participated in “Kifaya” when it started. I was running an initiative before that which was more leftist. If was called 20 March. Yeah, (inaudible 0:04:04:0) because the day the US went into Iraq, everybody went down to Tahrir. That was the 20th of March, 2003… so, a year later, we were trying to start a group, a political group that had simply the same idea behind “Kifaya” (inaudible 0:04:37:4) …

**NP:** Kifaya, 20 March

**LS:** Yeah… I mean, actually, I’ve lost track. There were lots of initiatives at that time. From the moment… first committees for the support of the Palestinian Intifada. We discovered that we could do this stuff without bothering with permits and stuff, and then the movement against the war in Iraq. We discovered that there was a portion of the street at least that was (inaudible 0:05:27:3) it wasn’t just an elitist thing. From that moment, there was always attempts at the… at doing different things in different places. One of the reasons why the University independence movement, March 9, lived and prospered at least for a while is that we insisted on keeping it about that, because in that period, absolutely every initiative sort of turned into a political initiative around everything, which tended to eventually ruin things, so we insisted that this was a movement about university independence. It was not about other issues, and most of us any way are involved in these other issues. There are other movements for these other issues. Then there was this whole movement about judicial independence in 2006. First there was 2005 where… that's what Kifaya was about, it was about "enough of Mubarak", we've had enough, he's had his runs and we want a proper election, and then he did these strange and stupid changes to the constitution which amounted to (inaudible 0:07:18:8) for me, this is a whole movement leading up to January. It had its ups and its downs. In 2009, people were completely down and feeling that the structured movement had been thwarted, everything had been thwarted. Sort of felt that you were hitting your head against the wall, but it turned out (inaudible 0:08:00:2) but in a different way. It was a very active period, in a way, January brought all these things together. When I think about it, I realize that in Tahrir, I met in those 18 days, I met every single person who had ever participated in anything, not in anything particularly political, but in anything that was not something for personal gain, and not something the government was telling you to do. Every single person whom I had ever participated with in anything, I sort of met them in Tahrir. I think what happened in January is that all this came together, all this energy that had been trying to open up areas came together in January.

**NP:** During the period before the 25th of Jan, were you ever scared when you were going out on demonstrations?

**LS:** Sure, already in 2005, in May 2005, there was this turn when they decided to repress the demonstrations and they loosed the MDP thugs on us and the scene where they harassed the women and took off their clothes on the steps of the (inaudible 0:10:04:0) so… there was already all of that, and of course there were arrests. And at the same time, because… it's another thing that I'd been following from the first attempt at putting up the Egyptian organization of women rights that always followed that stream too, and particularly organizations against torture and so and so. I personally knew that police torture was very right, even in periods where it didn't touch politicians. It's another… unfortunately, people were never properly aware of how widespread torture practices were. Because for a long period, nobody tortured politicians. They either tortured (inaudible 0:11:25:0) or they tortured (inaudible 0:11:31:4) which people thought was okay. So, one could see that there was… there was always a possibility of getting arrested, getting beaten up, or something like that. I personally don't scare easily so, you know, if it happens, it happens, that's it. And also eventually, of course, I realized that I reached an age and status where it probably wouldn't happen to me unless there was a really high-end decision to f\*\*\* everyone. Of course, as soon as Ala'a started becoming involved in stuff like 200 let's say, it was something to be scared about. Also, how do I put this? Saif, my husband has been tortured in 83, so I knew. But I don't know if that's me or that's… you know it can happen and you just behave as if it's not going to happen, that's it, until, of course, it happens to someone… (inaudible 0:13:42:3) to torture until the spate of revelations of torture which culminated in the Khaled Sai'd one. People did not realize how much, how random it was, that you could get tortured. That actually everybody was in danger. It wasn't a matter of being criminal or being an activist or being Jihadi or being anything. You could just get caught up in it for no reason whatsoever… I think that, again here the technology made a very big difference. Mobile phones that could take photographs really changed the face of Egypt. It's normal, I mean every change in technology has had throughout history a very strong impact on what political movements are like. Television had that impact, small cassette recorders had it.

**NP:** Photocopying machines.

**LS:** Photocopying machines. Print was way back I mean. It's a normal thing. One of reasons why I think and hope that this phase is going to get into a proper revolutionary phase again is that I think young people are far better able to use and make, use and push the capacity of whatever is available to limits that old people simply can't reach.

**NP:** Okay. You briefly mentioned the Egyptian organization. Were you a member of it?

**LS:** I was a member of it in its first inception before the… yeah, I was a member. I continued to be a member until it legalized its position according to the NGOs law. At the time, they were restructuring and I didn't bother because by then, I was interested in (inaudible 0:17:13:6) human rights organization thing, I was interested, I was trying to push an NGO particularly for torture, which actually we worked on for a while. This one, we wanted to have an NGO that was recognized by the state so we got into a whole legal turmoil which didn't end up anywhere, then we got busy with other things eventually, so…

**NP:** Did you leave before or after the split?

**LS:** I was there during the split. I attended the meeting which was completely catastrophic in which the split came out into the open completely, and I sort of, let's say I didn't leave, I didn't write saying "I am leaving", but I sort of stayed away. I distanced myself after the split. That was one of the reasons why when we re-launched it after they got a court order, I didn't bother putting my name in. I didn't want to be part of a fight and split and at the same time, I didn't want to say things… and by then, anyway, it didn't matter because there were other organizations. If you wanted to take this line, you could go here, and if you wanted to take this line, you could go there. There was no… I didn't think it mattered to fight about this particular organization taking the line that you thought was correct.

**NP:** given that you're not in a political party, and you're fairly an unaffiliated person, would that be fair to say?

**LS:** Yeah.

**NP:** what has kept you active all though these different periods? From where do you get your strength, energy, and motivation?

**LS:** I think, in a way, it becomes a way of life. I mean your default becomes being active not the other way around. You need to think about it and make a decision, I will not be bothering with this. But also it's… for me, the January revolution gave fantastic (inaudible 0:20:40:7) all these years before. I think because I have always, how do I put this? It sounds very religious or Christian. When I was very young, I used to feel guilty about every single poor person or disadvantaged person or a person who wasn't getting a chance that I met. Finally I resolved this dilemma by thinking that I'm privileged, I've got well- off parents, I've learned well even though the educational system was collapsing because my parents were university professors who could help me anytime and so on. This is why it's sort of a religious idea. If you're privileged, the only way to be not someone who is… no way!

**NP:** Thank you.

**LS:** When I'm in London, you can pay… You're welcome. I mean… if you are privileged, if you do not want to be actually sucking poor people's blood, you have to give back. It's the only justification for accepting privilege in a sense. I think that's (inaudible 0:22:58:2) when I read about what's happening now in government primary schools where the kids go and they're so hungry that they beg sandwiches from their colleagues. They don't beg a sandwich, because nobody can give it to them, they beg a bite. So, the kid eats by begging. Either you do something about this or you're really stealing these bites from his mouth. How would you justify that your children are in a proper school where they don't even have to deal with kids who need bites if you're not going to do something about it? I guess that's it. Okay, I need to go to the bathroom.

TAPE 3

**NP:** So, when did you hear that there was going to be a demonstration on the 25th of January?

**LS:** A couple of days before it. I don't remember exactly but it must have been 2 or 3 days before it. And because of what was happening in Tunisia and so on, a lot of individuals were saying this was going to be our revolution. Personally, I (inaudible 0:00:33:2) I mean I actually clearly remember that on… 25th was a Tuesday. On Monday, I was at the AUC attending a conference on… I don't know, something on education anyway, and I remember while I was leaving, people were asking. The second day of the conference was Tuesday, people were asking if I was going to come the next day. I said "well, tomorrow we have a revolution, so if the revolution ends early without people getting arrested and having to run around after them in jails, maybe I'll come". I remember saying that to Imad Mubarak and that was it. By then, I did expect the demonstrations to be big but I did not expect a revolution. When I decided that I was going to attend these demonstrations. That was what I naturally did. Any demonstrations that called against torture and abuse. And by that Monday, I knew that it was probably going to be a large demonstration not the very small stuff that we've been having for years (inaudible 0:02:01:2) but actually, a lot of these kids actually did believe. I met kids in the square after that, not kids, I mean men. I remember I met one young man, a very young doctor from Upper Egypt, and he came to Cairo on the 24th determined that they were going to… on the 24th not after he had seen how big it was going to be, with a sleeping bag, he was determined that he was staying until they brought Mubarak down. So there was a section of the young boys who came to the demonstrations who planned that was how it was going to be. We're going to demonstrate and have a sit-in in Tahrir until we bring Mubarak down. That's before we saw how successful the (inaudible 0:03:30:6). It was different, they were different.

**NP:** So you went down on the 25th?

**LS:** I went to the university first. We had exams, and one of the demonstrations was supposed to come out from in front of the university, then… they started to say it was not going to be from the university. There were a lot of rumors, and then… Mona phoned me, and she said it was going to be from Mustafa Mahmud. So I told her I was going to start walking from Mustafa Mahmud, from the university to Mustafa Mahmud. And then what happened actually was that Mustafa Mahmud was very heavily policed and the kids… this was one of many demonstrations anyway, but that particular demonstration was supposed to come out from Mustafa Mahmud, they changed the location of the beginning. They told each other and they all moved to the other side of the tracks. They started with like 50 people, and it swelled. I saw it after it swelled and broke all the police lines and come down (inaudible 0:05:34:8) Ahmad Abd Al-Aziz, but Mona told me it was incredible and unbelievable. There was like 30 or 40 of us, and someone started to cheer, and suddenly there were hundreds and then thousands. There was a flyover so we went on to the flyover and we found the security blocking the flyover, and the kids from across the tracks said "move, move, we're going to break the police lines", and they broke it. That's the point, that's the difference, that on that day and the days afterwards, all these kids from very poor areas. All these kids who had diplomas or university degrees but were living in dire conditions with no prospects of a proper job, they joined. I mean… they were unbeatable, and they continued to be unbeatable whenever they decided to join. And all this talk about the internet not reaching real people is stupid, because every single young man or woman between 13 and 35 who can read in this country uses the internet, and that's a lot of people from all walks of life. Anyway, Mona called me and said "Mom, that's great, you can't believe it". I started walking down Doqqi Street in order to meet them, and suddenly I met them. It was huge, you couldn't see the end of it. And we walked down to Tahrir, and by the time we were coming close to Tahrir, the police had given up trying to stop it. Actually, by then, (inaudible 0:08:21:9 were standing in these small batches and they were keeping people from beating them up. I mean… these two batches across the sides were keeping people from beating them up mainly. They arrived in Tahrir and already there were thousands, and suddenly people started chanting. Until that point, the chants were mainly against the police abuse and down with Mubarak. But suddenly people were chanting… "The people want the ouster of the regime". There, in Tahrir, the kids who were there decided that it's done, we're not leaving until he leaves… of course, at midnight, the police dispersed the Tahrir sit-in, with a very strong gas. Already we were hearing that there were uprisings in Suez and Alexandria mainly. And by midnight, when the police dispersed us, there had already been people killed in Suez. Suez was the first city where there were marches… from that point onwards, okay, maybe on the 26th, if Mubarak had come out and deposed Al-Adly and did what he offered to do a week later, maybe it could have worked for him, I don't know. But he didn't, and of course, he… the 26th and 27th demonstrations were small but they were non-stop everywhere. Actually that was… when we realized that we might be dispersed in Tahrir, they had already done this thing of cutting mobile connections in Tahrir, they had done it over the country. So when we realized that this could happen, the call went out that whatever happens on the 26th and 27th, Friday the 28th after prayers, there was going to be demonstrations from absolutely everywhere, because you've got an actual crowd and that call was agreed in Tahrir before it would be dispersed. 26th and 17th in Cairo, there were small demonstrations but non-stop. So the police were running around. All this was because all you need is 30 people to stand on a busy street and start calling and people would collect… the movement was already much stronger in both ways in Alexandria, because already people had been killed and so there were already demonstrations outside the (inaudible 0:13:28:1) demonstrations outside police stations, etc… on the 28th, the police made their last attempt, and for me that was a very strange day because I had decided I was going to go with the demonstration from Imbaba. I wanted to be in a demonstration from a poor area. I didn't want to be with demonstrations with famous people like Al-Baradi'y from Giza or the people going through Mustafa Mahmud. So there was this demonstration that was supposed to come out of Imbaba with a lot of our Leftist friends and so on, so I went there, and… again, the Imam in the mosque (inaudible 0:14:45:9) of a certain mosque in Imbaba. I don't know its name but it's in the middle of Imbaba. We were sitting at a cafeteria which oversee the mosque so that when the demonstration came out, we would be there. And the Imam took too long in his speech until the kids got fed up and they called for the demonstration anyway. They got fed up with waiting for it and called for the demonstration anyway. They started to collect and move, and already there was this thug. People from Imbaba wanted to go and burn down the police station. For them, this is oppression. And all the political revolutionary guys would like to get them to go anywhere else. So anyway, actually, the demonstration broke into 2 parts; the bigger part moved away from the police station towards Ahmad Orabi and Mohandeseen and so on, and the smaller part… I didn't realize it had broken into 2 parts until much later when I found (inaudible 0:16:03:4) and the smaller part, because these are small streets and so on. The smaller part actually did go to the corniche and passed by the police station, but we did manage to keep people from attacking the police station, we started to say "peaceful" and something like that. Anyway, by the time we passed the police station, we joked with the soldiers and said "why don't you take off your uniforms and join us?", and we got out onto the courniche beside the Nile, and we started walking towards downtown and Tahrir. They put a battalion of central security to cut us off. There was a battalion of central security that aimed at cutting us off just before the 15 May Bridge. We would not be able to pass, and they hit us with gas, so we ran into the alleys of Imbaba, and I think that's where this particular battalion made their error. They chased us into the small streets with tear gas so that people were gassed in their houses, people were gassed in the shops, and that was it. It was no longer peaceful. All the young men from (inaudible 0:17:54:4) were determined and it became a standing battle. They were going to fight the central security, they were also going to burn the police station, and it was a dumb deal and there was no way. One of the young men with me tried to keep it peaceful and they were going to kill him. I said "Shadi, these people have been attacked in their houses. For them, it is no longer peaceful. If you can't stomach it, just leave and go somewhere else but don't try to stop them, it won't work". You know, the battle lines were gone, the young men went up on top of the rooftops, small kids started making Molotov cocktails and taking them up to the young men on top of the roofs. It was a standing battle the whole day. We started doing first aid Pepsi bottles against the gas, stuff like that. I sort of spent like… I don't know, maybe 5 o'clock or something. All mobile phones were cut,, and in that area, even landlines weren't working, so I didn't know what was happening outside this particular battle where I was. It's interesting that in the middle of all this, undercover security people were still playing their game of talking about foreigners. We had a young foreign journalist, Salma Sai'd was there and she had this young foreign journalist with her… this guys picks on him , they're in the entrance to a big building where we'd go in and hide from the gas and bring in people who (inaudible 0:20:30:6) and stuff like that. He picks on him and he starts screaming that he's Israeli and stuff like that… so we go into this argument. I decided to protect the guy and I said, people had seen me helping them for days, so they weren't allowed to hit me when I stood in front of him and said "you're being stupid, we need the whole world to know what's happening here and you shouldn't do this". We had this argument, and it sort of ended in a standoff that… a resident from the building brought us into his apartment so we wouldn't be attacked. In the middle of all this ruckus, someone told me that Sana'a had left. I was worried about her. Sana'a had been with me and then she left. Anyway I wanted to … I made sure that Salma Sa'id and her brother and the journalist were okay in that apartment where the guy decided that nobody was going to touch them and that's it. I wanted to get his footage. Actually, I took the camera. No, I had the footage not the camera, I don't know, I had something, whatever. And I left to try and find out what had happened to everyone. So I left. It was actually easy to leave. We had tried earlier to tell people that we can go around another way, but by then they were in this standing battle and they were not going to be in this place, they were going to stay until they actually broke the police in this particular spot. So anyway, I left by walking away from the line, and I decided that I was going downtown to Hisham Mubarak center because that's where I was likely to hear news from anyone. I think they told me that Sana'a had left and that she left word that she was going to Hisham Mubarak. So I wanted to make sure that she was alright. I wanted to get the footage somewhere safe, so I started walking and avoiding… wherever I walked there were fires and there were gunfights between… at that time, Molotov from the crowds and guns from the police. The streets were by then, the streets of Muhandeseen were like war zones, so I kept avoiding each war area until I got to the 15th of May bridge. I started walking towards downtown. The place was devastated, gunfire everywhere and stuff like that. I had no idea, I actually thought that the demonstrations had been put down and these were the remnants. That's what it looked like. So anyway, I got to the end of 15th May bridge in Boulaq, and there was still battalion guarding the foreign ministry building, and they were shooting everywhere so people didn't know where to go basically, and then finally the officer in change realized that there were people on the bridge who were just trying to get through, so he called on the megaphone and said they could get through one by one at a run. It was very funny because it was "Harwala" which is a classical Arabic work for running, so people were… I was very (inaudible 0:26:31:4) then he realized it and said "I mean run". It was all like some sort of a mad film. Anyway, I ran and arrived at the emergency. I was just standing there and suddenly there was this roaring crowd coming down Ramsees street towards Tahrir. They had obviously broken the police at Ramsees, thousands! I was seeing the revolution victorious after I'd seen all the devastation, and one of the kids were running. He (inaudible 0:27:34:2) from the 25th, and he jumped out of the demonstration and he kissed me and he said "I told you we would win". Everyone was running towards Tahrir, and the police had disappeared, they'd melted. Eventually I went up to Hisham Mubarak with the footage, and found out that Sana'a had arrived safely at some friend's home, and I decided I wanted to get back into this way and look at Tahrir and so on. There were gun battles all around Tahrir. The demonstrations were arriving at Tahrir but they were going through gun battles. The army was starting to deploy by then… so anyway, (inaudible 028:52:3) Tahrir. There was already the gun battle around the museum. I had discovered on the 26th and the 27th that I was a liability when there is a battle. The kids insist on protecting me and they don't run away fast enough and so on, so whenever there's an actual battle, I used to get back because I'm simply a liability. So anyway (inaudible 0:29:34:4) and I would walk home, make sure how my father was, get an idea what was happening from television or whatever. So I circled Tahrir and got to 6th of October Bridge. Of course it was unbelievable. There's this pitched gun battle going on in Tahrir, in Abd Al-Mene'm Riyad, everywhere, and everyone is parking their cars and standing to watch. It was unbelievable. And then I was still walking, there were three young men, 3 friends who came out of the battle and stood catching their breath on the 6th of October bridge where there was no gas and they could breathe. They stood talking to each other and trying to decide whether to get back or to go away. They stood for a while, then someone said… "Azbakeyya police station has been torched and there are guns to be had", and they ran

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**LS:** towards (inaudible 0:00:00:6)… they decided they weren't going back, they were going to go. That's why I actually get very angry when people talk about the torching of the police station as an act of anti-revolution sabotage. It was a completely revolutionary act done by people who had had it up to here with the police. Anyway, I walked for a while and then I continued to walk back home. I checked out television and what's happening and landlines were working in my home, so I made calls to make sure. And then I made sure my father was alright, etc, and then I got a call from Mona I think. Anyway, I got a call that there were injured and dead in what have become the first field hospital in the mosque right beside Tahrir, and that Mona was there, and that they needed help. They needed medical supplies, they needed help if someone could get there away from Tahrir to (inaudible 0:01:36:2) the injured and so on. So, I called my brother and that was (inaudible 0:01:44:9) I don't know. Anyway, we called Ala'a and we went down to see what we could do. By the time we got there, the army had already taken charge and they had moved out the injured… there had been, at first the army had been trying to help the police, and then they decided that this was a lost cause, they really had to pacify things. So anyway, we only had kept… started keeping the police away from the field hospital, moving the injured to a proper hospital, moving the bodies, etc. and people were… Tahrir was becoming somewhere where you could be… and people were pouring into Ittihad. Gun battles were not completely over, but basically over. And we started the proper sit-in that lasted. And that was the 28th. By then, I think everybody else was sure it was just a matter of perseverance. I've always believed that, so… I have always been convinced that when the people come out to the streets, ever since the Iranian revolution, I've been convinced of that. And you shoot them and they come back out, there's no stopping them. Once people have been shot and killed and come out again and again, it's done. There is no stopping them. You have to ask questions.

**NP:** Did you go every day?

**LS:** Yeah, no. I stayed in Tahrir. I used to leave early in the morning, walk home and check on my father and go to the bathroom and stuff like that, check on my father just for a couple of hours, and then come back, and then I would leave again in the evening to check on my home and father and do whatever needed to be done like, you know, phone calls and stuff like that, and then I'd come back. I stayed the whole time until we left voluntarily on the 11th.

**NP:** A lot has been said about Tahrir square during these 18 days. Do you have your own particular thoughts or would you agree with some of the general experiences?

**LS:** Let me say that my experience was a very unique experience. It was exhilarating. All the great stuff was there, but also there was all the potential problems. I mean… there was for instance… the persecuting after the attack on Tahrir that was "the battle of the Camel", there was a sense of siege. The people were becoming very… a lot of those in Tahrir were becoming very paranoid. Anyone who started having a discussion about (inaudible 0:06:53:6) so it was a problem, as early as that, there was a problem. There was… it wasn't as strong as what happened in other… in later sit-ins. There was already a problem. There was an intolerance of discussion.

**NP:** Discussion about…

**LS:** About what's next. And there was complete intolerance of discussion about… people were coming to Tahrir and some of them were innocent people who wanted to know why we didn't accept the compromises Mubarak was offering. There was a tendency to be very aggressive towards people like that regardless of how genuine they were. There was a tendency to treat people like that as police spies even if it was a guy with his two small daughters. No way is this a spy, but there was… (Inaudible 0:08:42:1). Already there was a potential for problems but on the whole, the atmosphere was very positive, and it was like people… it was like people knew… knew what their weaknesses were, things like the strike between Christians and Muslims, and were determined to show that we are not like that. I mean… people were putting on a show of what's best in them, part of it was show, but it also meant that they knew what was right. The main problem was that… nobody really knew what to do once Mubarak is gone. I mean… and there was this… nobody really had a proper… because it all came about and escalated very quickly without anybody having a real plan for what to do next. It was like we couldn't believe that we could actually seize power. The last two days, the 9th, the 10th, and the 11th, I spent them with people running around between the different political factions telling them to agree on something and tell the army to hand over power. Agree on anything, agree on an interim government or an interim president or an interim presidential council, and they would say "yes, of course, we need to do that, we will have a meeting tomorrow evening". Tomorrow evening is going to be too late! I mean… actually on the Friday on which Mubarak abdicated (inaudible 0:12:06:9) we… the Revolutionary Youth Coalition was going to have a meeting to decide on the 8th in the evening on three person council. People did not have the proper sense of (inaudible 0:12:33:8) they had that Friday. Thursday, Friday. Or maybe they had another agenda and they were just telling us this. I don't know but what happened is that we met with the leadership of the Muslim Brotherhood, and they agreed that an interim council of two judges and someone nominated by the army should be a presidential council, and start preparing the country for whatever, elections or whatever. They agreed in principal, and they said that they would have a meeting I don't know when. They all agreed to this plan, but they all were going to have meetings in the evening or tomorrow, and by 4 o'clock, Mubarak had abdicated, and the military council had taken power and people were celebrating in the streets, and it was too late to do anything. So it's one of the most annoying aspects of this whole thing is that we did not seize power by inefficiency, just inefficiency, not by a conspiracy but by inefficiency. I'm sure, I'm almost sure. There always a possibility that there's something else, but I'm almost sure that it's just that. People did not believe that their chance was there to seize.

**NP:** Since Mubarak left, have you participated in the political transition, the political process that unfolded, have you participated in the elections?

**LS:** Yes, absolutely I participated in everything, the protests and the elections, yes. Actually I always… because we have this long history of people just giving up on elections, I have always disliked boycotting as a technique; I find it… it doesn't mobilize people, it ends up being however you dress it, it ends up that most people are staying at home because they won't make a difference, not because their staying at home is an act. So I always referred to push for participation. I'm even doing that now. I'm asking people to go and vote "no" for the constitution not to… to not refuse the process and not go. I've never endorsed the idea that participating in an election or in a referendum gives any kind of legitimacy to the authority organizing it. I've never seen the connection. They are organizing it because they are (inaudible 0:16:36:3) not because they have legitimacy.

**NP:** Did you join any political parties?

**LS:** No… I've always had a problem with political parties… and since the revolution, I've always found that youth movements are much more effective actually. I do believe that we need a political party. I know that we need to work not just have a grassroots movement on the streets and not have someone contending for power. I just think that the people who do, who do one this are different from the people who do the other. I actually think that trying to get the people who do grassroots movements to do political parties just ruins both. I believe that the job of a political party is to struggle towards gaining power, and that this takes a different kind of mental setup and form of working, and then what you do for a protest movement or a social movement and so. At the moment, I think we need both. Some people are more suited to this and others are suited to that. Instead of people who are… one of the main problems we have at the moment is that people who are forming political parties are trying to convince people who are doing grassroots social movements or protest movements that this is the wrong way to go, and the others are considering these are not revolutionists. I just think we need both. Both should concentrate on undermining those in power not on undermining each other.

**NP:** You're involved in the Revolutionary Front?

**LS:** Yes.

**NP:** Do you see this as part of the grassroots mobilization?

**LS:** Yeah, this is actually… this front is formed by the 6th of April, revolutionary socialists, Youth for Justice and Freedom, and lot of independents. These are all movements, they are not political parties. They are all movements, basically protest movements. So, yes I see this. That's why I was interested in it as a way of… an umbrella to synchronize radical protest movements.

**NP:** What sort of effect is there of the polarization on social movements or grassroots movements?

**LS:** Well, actually that was the point of forming this front, because the polarization was wrecking everything, and it was giving… it was making it possible for the… the (inaudible 0:21:24: 0) in power at the moment to attack things like the 6th of April movement of the revolutionary socialists or independent individuals who are known to be (inaudible 0:21:36:9) while not… and claim that these were actually working for the Muslim Brotherhood. The claims varied depending on how sophisticated an argument each one is making, either you are stupid and you're objectively working for the Muslim Brotherhood even if you're not aware of it and even if you're against the Muslim Brotherhood. That's the most sophisticated argument, or you are a sleeping Muslim Brotherhood cell and you have been activated. That's the other end of the spectrum, but in the end, you are undermining the war against terrorism, you are undermining the secular state, etc. it was, you know, increasingly the case that people were being attacked for this and depicted as being just a few people here and just a few people there. So, I think the main reason actually why we decided to form this front was to be counted together. If you are going to attack the 6th of April, you have to take us all on. You cannot say that 6th of April are agent, but Laila is a nice person, she's just a bit stupid because she believes in human rights. It's not going to work, we're not going to let you get away with that.

**NP:** Have you faces these accusations that you've spoken about or any of these arguments that were made about those opposing the military? Have you faced these comments personally?

**LS:** Absolutely, I'm facing abuse from both sides. We are being, I personally… of course, on the one hand, I'm being called the whole spectrum from stupid and has no awareness of the intricacies of policy and politics and class struggle and etc, and sticking to a romantic human rights view of the world which is actually completely misguided, etc, right up to the Muslim Brotherhood who say that I backed the coup and called for the extermination of the Muslims… I mean it's what happens when there is polarization and you're refusing to stand beside one of the poles.

**NP:** In the past, you've spoken about 9 of March and also about the activities of 9 March since the revolution. So we don't need to cover that ground again, but if you wanted to add…

**LS:** But I would like to say that polarization (inaudible 0:25:31:3) our work in March 9. I mean, we found it impossible to mount a campaign against the arbitrary arrest of colleagues who were from the Muslim Brotherhood, absolutely impossible. Nobody was willing to sign petitions, we are finding it very difficult to mount campaigns against arbitrary arrests of colleagues who everybody knows are not Muslim Brotherhood but who have been accused of being Muslim Brotherhood. Here we are managing to mount a campaign but it's very difficult. (inaudible 0:26:17:3) we are finding it very difficult to maintain our stance that the police should not be allowed on the university campus, and from the other side, because people like Hussam Issa and so on, we're March niners, so we're getting the other end of the stick. "These are March niners, when they're in power, that's what they're doing, they are…", so yes. It has hurt our work considerably. The numbers have dwindled, a lot of people have just given up because the way March 9 was is to try to appeal to university professors who simply wanted a good university and had integrity and so on, and were not particularly politicized, people like that have simply given up and shut up. They're not against us, they're not pro us. When you meet them… when I got arrested, they all called me and… but they're not willing, they're depressed and they don't want to move. So (inaudible 0:27:47:1) on the other hand, because our work was successful, and because the universities actually got to elect their deans and heads of departments and presidents, it has been possible to keep the universities from being completely thrown into the general polarization in the whole off site. It was interesting to know that the worst university in violence and abuse of freedoms and colleagues violence and student violence as well is Al-Azhar which doesn't have the same laws and does not have an elected administration.

**NP:** Can I just ask, just to check, did you sign "Tamarrod"?

**LS:** I sighed of course. I sincerely believe that we needed… no, let me say it… I thought that we could use softer means of pushing, but in the weeks running up to the 30th of June, I could see that the whole country had turned against Morsi and you could see that everyone was on the streets. So that was truly the popular feeling, and I sincerely believed that the only way to save the situation was for Morsi to bow to the popular will and either resign or call a referendum on his presidency or call early… unfortunately, he didn't go that way. I did not… I under assessed the danger of a complete counter revolutionary attack. I thought people would not allow things to go that way. It goes to show that young people at the moment, no more than us, that Ala'a doesn't

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**LS:** understand that danger. Ala'a, Mona, and all of them were really skeptic and really very depressed in the run up the 30th of June. They agreed that Morsi had to go and that this whole (inaudible 0:00:19:0) I didn't see that coming until later. I still believe this could have been avoided if Morsi had decided to… play things a different way. Anyway, that explains why I signed "Tamarrod", and why I went down on the 30th of June right up to the third when Sisi deposed Morsi, and why I didn't go down after that at all of course. I realized that we were going the wrong way completely when Sisi asked for an authorization. For me, the counter coup, the coup was the 26th of July, not the 3rd of July. For me, the 3rd of July was an attempt to head off a full blown revolution. They were deposing Morsi before people really got into a proper revolution. They weren't waiting like they waited with Mubarak until… but the coup, the real seizure of power was when Sisi made that speech asking for authorization, when people responded. And again, I also believe that it could have been avoided if the political parties had had the courage to refuse the authorization even though they were in the minority. He needed their cover, and they should've withdrawn their cover at that moment. Until he dispersed Raba'a and Nahda, he needed their cover, and they should've withdrawn their cover. They should not have waited for… anyway, they didn't withdraw their cover at all. But even Barad'y did not withdraw his cover until the massacres. They should've withdrawn their cover at the point in which (inaudible 0:03:37:2). But (inaudible 0:03:43:2) things… anyway, there was… clearly, it was clear for anyone in Egypt during June that there was no way Morsi could handle (inaudible 0:04:14:2) people had turned against him completely. In the Metro, in the taxi in a micro-bus, people would be saying "we\re waiting for the 30th of June and we're going to show him". People had turned against him and to this day, I cannot say how the Muslim Brotherhood could have been blind to this. How on earth they thought they were going on… except of course I see how, I mean… they are exactly like the generals and they think in terms of "the army won't turn against us because the United States won't agree". They do not think in terms of popular moods at all. They do not see them or acknowledge them. Everything for them is people being moved by things. I see the same thing happening now. It's going to take a while but the popular mood is turning. Of course it's not like Morsi days because in Morsi days, you had… you turned against Morsi and there was someone to (inaudible 0:05:38:0) and now, the popular mood is turning and it's going back to despondency because it hasn't turned in a way to make (inaudible 0:05:47:4) it's not going to do that. But the popular mood is turning. People are not… even people who actually want Sisi to come to power, it's no longer because they believe that he can rise with the country. It's because they believe that we’ve lost and we may as well just shut up and get on with the horrible life we had before, because things can only get worse not better. You barely… I don't know, it's difficult to decipher about this but I really believe that very few people now believe that Sisi is going to fix things. I think we just believe that he might be able to control things and that's it. And since he couldn't be as much of a failure as Morsi ever was, eventually, they'll turn against him too. There's of course a big price to pay for it.

**NP:** Is there anything I haven't asked that you want to tell me?

**LS:** No, I've spat a lot and talked quite a lot even about things you didn't ask about.

**NP:** It was all very interesting.

**LS:** I hope so.

**NP:** And you're going to continue being involved with revolutionary fronts and the 9th of March?

**LS:**Yes, absolutely. You have to continue, this is… there's no (inaudible 0:08:06:7) the idea that if we stop now, things can stabilize is very stupid. Things are not going to stabilize because things were already going from bad to worse even before the revolution. You can either start a proper radical reform of things are going to get worse and keep getting worse. So, I think maybe… anyone who wants to stay in the country or does not want to leave the country I live in doesn't really have an option except to continue. The place is falling apart. It's not just a matter of freedom, the place is falling apart. You have an education system that is falling apart, you can't get proper medical treatment, you can't get any kind of medical treatment if you're poor and you don't get anything proper if you're rich. The place is falling apart, you can't continue like this… and then, the security station which is something we never had, it was already happening before the revolution but it's getting much worse. I remember I was Mexico in 2000. I saw these areas where rich people live, and you have armed guards outside the kindergarten. Now, at that time I thought "Oh my God, how can people live like that?" we're going to get there if we don't do something about it soon. You have actually people with machine guns on towers guarding a kindergarten in Mexico City. I thought "Oh my God, how on earth does one leave their child in the place escorted by machine guns?" it is ridiculous, but that's where we're heading if we don't do something about it very soon.

**NP:** Thank you so much.

**LS:** You're welcome.