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Bouazizi: The Man Who Set Himself and Tunisia on Fire

By Rania Abouzeid

He is now famous throughout Tunisia and the Arab world — a legend, in fact. But Mohammed Bouazizi never set out to be a byword. His aunt Radia Bouazizi says his dream was to save enough money to be able to rent or buy a pickup truck. "Not to cruise around in," she says, "but for his work." Her nephew was a vegetable seller. "He would come home tired after pushing the cart around all day. All he wanted was a pickup." Instead, he started a revolution.

Bouazizi was like the hundreds of desperate, downtrodden young men in hardscrabble Sidi Bouzid. Many of them have university degrees but spend their days loitering in the cafés lining the dusty streets of this impoverished town, 190 miles (300 km) south of the capital Tunis. Bouazizi, 26, didn't have a college degree, having only reached what his mother says was the baccalaureate level, which is roughly equivalent to high school. He was, however, luckier than most in that he at least earned an income from selling vegetables, work that he'd had for seven years.

[\(See pictures of the ransacked mansions of Tunisia.\)](#)

But on Dec. 17 his livelihood was threatened when a policewoman confiscated his unlicensed vegetable cart and its goods. It wasn't the first time it had happened, but it would be the last. Not satisfied with accepting the 10-dinar fine that Bouazizi tried to pay (\$7, the equivalent of a good day's earnings), the policewoman allegedly slapped the scrawny young man, spat in his face and insulted his dead father.

Humiliated and dejected, Bouazizi, the breadwinner for his family of eight, went to the provincial headquarters, hoping to complain to local municipality officials, but they refused to see him. At 11:30 a.m., less than an hour after the confrontation with the policewoman and without telling his family, Bouazizi returned to the elegant double-storey white building with arched azure shutters, poured fuel over himself and set himself on fire. He did not die right away but lingered in the hospital till Jan. 4. There was so much outrage over his ordeal that even President Zine el Abidine Ben Ali, the dictator, visited Bouazizi on Dec. 28 to try to blunt the anger. But the outcry could not be suppressed and, on Jan.

14, just 10 days after Bouazizi died, Ben Ali's 23-year rule of Tunisia was over.

[\(See a brief history of self-immolation.\)](#)

Though proud of the consequences of Bouazizi's self-immolation, his family is still indescribably sad. "Mohammed did what he did for the sake of his dignity," says his mother, Mannoubia, standing in the room he shared with his brother Karim, 14. It's one of four in her small but well-kept home. She points to the two thin olive-green foam mattresses on the floor where her two sons slept. The only other piece of furniture in the room is a large cabinet. Weeping, his mother pulls out a black-and-grey jacket, lovingly clutching it before burying her face in it. "It smells of him," she says.

Her teenage daughter Basma rushes to comfort her. A few moments later, Mannoubia stops crying, dabbing her blue eyes with the edge of her multicolored hijab, a rare sight in secular Tunis but common in conservative, rural parts of the country. "I am proud of my son, although I am in mourning, and I am sad, but thanks to God, Mohammed lives, he didn't die," she says resolutely. "He lives on, his name lives on. I am proud of what happened in Tunis, I am proud that he is known throughout the Arab world."

The residents of Sidi Bouzid are all immensely proud of how Bouazizi's actions spurred what many refer to as the "people's revolution" and how it has shaken despotic Arab governments elsewhere. "The son of Hay al-Noor [Bouazizi's neighborhood] in Sidi Bouzid, this is the location of the revolution," reads Arabic graffiti a street away from the martyr's modest home.

Just as the young woman Neda Agha-Soltan became a symbol of Iran's green movement after she was shot while watching a demonstration two years ago, Bouazizi has become a popular symbol among Arabs. He is being emulated as well. There have been almost a dozen copycat self-immolations in several Arab capitals including Cairo and Algiers. However, they have not provoked the same popular reaction as Bouazizi's martyrdom did in Tunisia, despite the seething frustrations of Egyptians and Algerians over high unemployment, corruption and autocratic rule.

[\(Tunisia pushes out its strongman: Could other Arab nations follow?\)](#)

Those frustrations remain in Sidi Bouzid — though the upheaval in Tunis has given the unemployed a dose of hope. On Thursday, Jaber Hajlawi, an unemployed 22-year-old lawyer and one of Bouazizi's neighbors, leaned against the graffitied wall as he lit a cigarette. "We were silent before but Mohammed showed us that we must react," he says. Clad in a short black leather jacket and blue jeans with gelled black hair, he looks the part of a rebel, with a cause. "My brother has a Ph.D.; he works in a supermarket. The problem is that qualifications mean nothing. It's all about who you know," he says. "Now, we expect things to change. I want my freedom and my rights. I want to work. I want a job."

The demand echoes across town. About 300 feet away from the spot where Bouazizi set himself alight,

young men in the hundreds gather every day, eager to express their views to anyone who pulls out a notebook. They have erected handwritten banners near portraits of Bouazizi. "We are all prepared to sacrifice our blood for the people," reads one.

They are already impatient with the new regime. "Not one official has talked to us," says Mohammad Boukhari, 40, an unemployed teacher. "Where are they? Why won't they listen to what we need?" He is interrupted by Issawi Mohammad Naja, 32, an unemployed agriculturalist. "We are here because we want our dignity. We don't want to have to rely on political favors or bribes to get jobs; we need to clean out the system." Another young man pushes through the burgeoning crowd. "I'm an IT graduate and I have been unemployed for four years because I don't know anyone in the municipality. What is my future? We are all Bouazizis if our hopes are dashed." The anger that set Bouazizi aflame still flickers in Sidi Bouzid — and may grow to set the country on fire again.

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