

# Mohamed Bouazizi

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**Tarek al-Tayeb Mohamed Bouazizi** (Arabic: محمد البوعزيزي; 29 March 1984 – 4 January 2011) was a Tunisian street vendor who set himself on fire on 17 December 2010, in protest of the confiscation of his wares and the harassment and humiliation that he reported was inflicted on him by a municipal official and her aides. His act became a catalyst for the Tunisian Revolution<sup>[2]</sup> and the wider Arab Spring, inciting demonstrations and riots throughout Tunisia in protest of social and political issues in the country. The public's anger and violence intensified following Bouazizi's death, leading then-President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali to step down on 14 January 2011, after 23 years in power.

The success of the Tunisian protests inspired protests in several other Arab countries, plus several non-Arab countries. The protests included several men who emulated Bouazizi's act of self-immolation, in an attempt to bring an end to their own autocratic governments. Those men and Bouazizi were hailed by Arab commentators as "heroic martyrs of a new Middle Eastern revolution".<sup>[3]</sup>

In 2011, Bouazizi was posthumously awarded the Sakharov Prize jointly along with four others for his and their contributions to "historic changes in the Arab world".<sup>[4]</sup> The Tunisian government honored him with a postage stamp.<sup>[5]</sup>

*The Times* of the United Kingdom named Bouazizi as "Person of 2011".<sup>[6][7]</sup>

## Mohamed Bouazizi

محمد البوعزيزي



<b>Born</b>	Tarek al-Tayeb Mohamed Bouazizi <sup>[1]</sup> <div>29 March 1984</div> <div>Sidi Bouzid, Tunisia</div>
<b>Died</b>	4 January 2011 (aged 26) <div>Ben Arous, Tunisia</div>
<b>Resting place</b>	Garaat Bennour cemetery
<b>Other names</b>	Basboosa
<b>Occupation</b>	Street vendor
<b>Known for</b>	Self-immolation

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## Early life and employment struggles

Mohamed Bouazizi, who was known locally as "Basboosa",<sup>[8]</sup> was born in Sidi Bouzid, Tunisia, on 29 March 1984.<sup>[9]</sup> His father, a construction worker in Libya, died of a heart attack when Bouazizi was three, and his mother married Bouazizi's uncle some time later.<sup>[2]</sup> Along with his six siblings,<sup>[10]</sup> Bouazizi was educated in a one-room country school in Sidi Salah, a small village 12 miles (19 km) from Sidi Bouzid.<sup>[11]</sup> Although several media outlets reported that Bouazizi had a university degree,<sup>[10][12][13]</sup> his sister, Samia Bouazizi, stated that he had never graduated from high school,<sup>[14]</sup> but that it was something he had wanted for both himself and his sisters.<sup>[11]</sup> With his uncle in poor health and unable to work regularly,<sup>[15]</sup> Bouazizi had worked various jobs since he was ten,<sup>[2]</sup> and in his late teens he quit school in order to work full-time.<sup>[15]</sup>

Bouazizi lived in a modest stucco home, a 20-minute walk from the center of Sidi Bouzid,<sup>[16][17]</sup> a rural town in Tunisia burdened by corruption<sup>[18]</sup> and suffering an unemployment rate estimated at 30%.<sup>[2]</sup> According to his mother, he applied to join the army, but was refused, and several subsequent job applications also resulted in rejection.<sup>[15]</sup> He supported his mother, uncle, and younger siblings, including paying for one of his sisters to attend university, by earning approximately US\$140 per month selling produce on the street in Sidi Bouzid.<sup>[11][15]</sup> He was also working toward the goal of buying or renting a pickup truck for his work.<sup>[19]</sup> A close friend of Bouazizi said he "was a very well-known and popular man [who] would give free fruit and vegetables to very poor families".<sup>[15]</sup>

## Confiscation of wares and self-immolation

According to friends and family, local police officers had allegedly targeted and mistreated Bouazizi for years, including during his childhood, regularly confiscating his small wheelbarrow of produce,<sup>[15]</sup> but Bouazizi had no other way to make a living, so he continued to work as a street vendor. Around 10 p.m. on 16 December 2010, he had contracted approximately US\$200 in debt to buy the produce he was to sell the following day. On the morning of 17 December, he started his workday at 8 a.m.<sup>[11]</sup> Just after 10:30 a.m., the police began harassing him again, ostensibly because he did not have a vendor's permit.<sup>[19]</sup> However, while some sources state that street vending is illegal in Tunisia,<sup>[20]</sup> and others that Bouazizi lacked a required permit to sell his wares,<sup>[11][19]</sup> according to the head of Sidi Bouzid's state office for employment and independent work, no permit is needed to sell from a cart.<sup>[18]</sup>

Bouazizi did not have the funds to bribe police officials to allow his street vending to continue.<sup>[11][21]</sup> Similarly, two of Bouazizi's siblings accused authorities of attempting to extort money from their brother,<sup>[18]</sup> and during an interview with Reuters, one of his sisters stated, "What kind of repression do you imagine it takes for a young man to do this? A man who has to feed his family by buying goods on credit when they fine him...and take his goods. In Sidi Bouzid, those with no connections and no money for bribes are humiliated and insulted and not allowed to live."<sup>[17]</sup>

Bouazizi's family claims he was publicly humiliated, that a 45-year-old female municipal official, Faida Hamdi,<sup>[2][10][15]</sup> slapped him in the face, spat at him, confiscated his electronic weighing scales, and tossed aside his produce cart.<sup>[19]</sup> It was also stated that she made a slur against his deceased father.<sup>[17][19]</sup> Bouazizi's family says her sex made his humiliation worse.<sup>[10][22]</sup>

Faida Hamdi<sup>[2][10][15]</sup> and her brother claimed in interviews that she did not slap Bouazizi or otherwise mistreat him. An eyewitness referred to by *Asharq Al-Awsat* claimed not to have seen Hamdi slap Bouazizi.<sup>[23][24]</sup>

Both Bouazizi's mother and the eyewitness who told *Asharq Al-Awsat* stated that her aides had kicked and beaten him after confiscating his fruit-cart,<sup>[23]</sup> Faïda Hamdi states it might have happened<sup>[24]</sup> and *Asharq Al-Awsat* denies it happened.

Bouazizi, angered by the confrontation,<sup>[25]</sup> ran to the governor's office to complain<sup>[19]</sup> and to ask for his scales back.<sup>[26]</sup> The governor refused to see or listen to him, even after Bouazizi was quoted as saying "If you don't see me, I'll burn myself."<sup>[19]</sup> Bouazizi acquired a can of gasoline from a nearby gas station and returned to the governor's office. While standing in the middle of traffic, he shouted, "How do you expect me to make a living?"<sup>[26]</sup> He then doused and set himself alight with a match at 11:30 a.m. local time, less than an hour after the altercation.<sup>[19]</sup>

## Death and funeral

According to Bouazizi's sister, whose information was based on details relayed from her uncle who was present at the scene, people immediately panicked when he caught fire, and one of them tried to douse the flames with water, which only worsened his condition.<sup>[27]</sup> Bouazizi barely survived, and had suffered severe burns on over 90% of his body before locals managed to douse the flames. He was taken by ambulance to a medical facility in Sidi Bouzid. When they were unable to treat Bouazizi's severe burns, he was taken to a larger hospital in Sfax, more than 70 miles (110 km) away.<sup>[11]</sup> Later, as the government's interest in his case grew, he was transferred to a Burn and Trauma Centre in Ben Arous, where he was placed in an intensive care unit.<sup>[28]</sup> On 31 December 2010, doctors at the Ben Arous Burn and Trauma Centre reported that Bouazizi was in stable condition, and that he was showing positive prognostic factors.<sup>[27]</sup> However, he remained in a coma throughout the remainder of his life.<sup>[29]</sup>



Ben Arous Burn and Trauma Centre where Bouazizi died

Bouazizi was visited in hospital by then-President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali.<sup>[30]</sup> According to Bouazizi's mother, Ben Ali promised to send him to France for medical treatment,<sup>[15]</sup> but no such transfer was ever arranged. Bouazizi died at the Ben Arous Burn and Trauma Centre 18 days after the immolation, on 4 January 2011, at 5:30 p.m. local time.<sup>[31][32]</sup>

It is estimated that more than 5,000 people participated in the funeral procession that began in Sidi Bouzid and continued through to Bouazizi's native village, though police did not allow the procession to pass near the spot at which Bouazizi had burned himself.<sup>[33]</sup> From the crowd, many were heard chanting "Farewell, Mohamed, we will avenge you. We weep for you today. We will make those who caused your death weep."<sup>[34]</sup> He was buried at Garaat Bennour cemetery, 10 miles (16 km) from Sidi Bouzid.<sup>[35]</sup> His grave was described by Al-Jazeera as "simple" and surrounded by cactuses, olive and almond trees.<sup>[15]</sup> In addition, a Tunisian flag flies next to it.<sup>[36]</sup>

## Investigation

An investigation was launched following Bouazizi's self-immolation to find the details leading up to his actions. On 20 December 2010, it was reported that Faïda Hamdi, the female officer who allegedly accosted Bouazizi the day of his immolation, was suspended along with the secretary-general (governor) of Sidi Bouzid,<sup>[37]</sup> but this was subsequently denied by the latter.<sup>[38]</sup> Some time later, Hamdi was arrested on orders from President Ben Ali and held in an unspecified town.<sup>[2][23]</sup> A brother of Hamdi later stated that she had been arrested and detained

twice, the first time following Ben Ali's visit to Bouazizi in the hospital and subsequent meeting with his mother and sister at his presidential palace. He says his sister and her aides were released following a short detention and the closing of the investigation which "confirmed her innocence."<sup>[23]</sup> He said her second arrest was "in response to the demands of the Tunisian protesters," and that the Tunisian security authorities informed him that she was being held only for her own protection and would be released once the protesting ended.<sup>[23]</sup>

According to Bouazizi's mother, Bouazizi undertook his action because he had been humiliated, not because of the family's poverty.<sup>[19]</sup> "It got to him deep inside, it hurt his pride," she said, referring to the police harassment.<sup>[15]</sup> One of Bouazizi's sisters stated during an interview with *Asharq Al-Awsat* that their family intends to take legal action against all involved, "whether this is the municipal officers that slapped and insulted him, or the mayor [who] refused to meet him."<sup>[23]</sup>

On 19 April, the case against Hamdi was dropped after Bouazizi's mother withdrew the family's complaint against her. She stated "It was a difficult but well-thought out decision to avoid hatred and... [to] help reconcile the residents of Sidi Bouzid." Hamdi had maintained her innocence, telling the court she did not slap Bouazizi, while her lawyer said the matter was "purely a political affair." Bouazizi's brother Salem supported the decision, saying "All the money in the world can't replace the loss of Mohamed who sacrificed himself for freedom and for dignity." Large crowds of people outside the courtroom also appeared to have been satisfied by the Bouazizi family's decision with some claiming Hamdi was being used as a scapegoat.<sup>[39][40]</sup>

## Protests

Outraged by the events that led to Bouazizi's self-immolation, protests began in Sidi Bouzid within hours,<sup>[18]</sup> building for more than two weeks, with attempts by police to quiet the unrest serving only to fuel what was quickly becoming a violent and deadly movement.<sup>[41]</sup> After Bouazizi's death, the protests became widespread, moving into the more affluent areas and eventually into the capital. The anger and violence became so intense that President Ben Ali fled Tunisia with his family on 14 January 2011,<sup>[19]</sup> trying first to go to Paris, but was refused refuge by the French government. They were eventually welcomed into Saudi Arabia under "a long list of conditions" (such as being barred from participation in the media and politics), ending his 23-year rule and sparking "angry condemnation" among Saudis.<sup>[41]</sup> In Tunisia, unrest persisted as a new regime took over, leaving many citizens of Tunisia feeling as though their needs were still being ignored.<sup>[42]</sup>

## Aftermath and legacy

Many Arabs in the Middle East and North Africa regard Bouazizi as a hero and inspiration.<sup>[43][44]</sup> He is credited with galvanising the frustrations of the region's youth against their governments into the mass demonstrations, revolts, and revolutions that have become known as the Arab Spring.<sup>[45]</sup> One year on, Tunisian writer and academic Larbi Sadiki asserted that Bouazizi's self-immolation "changed the course of Arab political history," achieving the "breakthrough in the fight against autocracy." However, he also wrote it would take years before the act and the subsequent chain of events that followed were "profoundly grasped by historians and social scientists."<sup>[46]</sup>

Bouazizi is considered a martyr by the Progressive Democratic Party (PDP) of Tunisia.<sup>[15]</sup> Tunisian film



Tunisian street protests

director, Mohamed Zran, plans on making a feature film about Bouazizi, describing him as "a symbol for eternity."<sup>[45]</sup> Tarak Ben Ammar, also a Tunisian film director, intends to make a film on Bouazizi as well, stating he is "a hero for us as Tunisians and the Arab world as a whole."<sup>[43]</sup>

Since suicide is forbidden in Islam, Bouazizi's self-immolation created controversy among scholarly Muslim circles. While al-Azhar, the most prestigious religious institution in the Sunni Muslim world, issued a *fatwa* ("directive") stating "suicide violates Islam even when it is carried out as a social or political protest," influential Egyptian cleric Yusuf al-Qaradawi spoke sympathetically of Bouazizi.<sup>[3]</sup>



A French protest in support of "the Hero of Tunisia", on 15 January 2011

On 4 February 2011, Bertrand Delanoë, the mayor of Paris, announced that, as a tribute to honour Bouazizi, a square in Paris will be named after him;<sup>[47]</sup> the Place Mohamed Bouazizi was unveiled four days later. On 17 February, the main square in Tunis that was previously called "November 7", after the date of Ben Ali's take-over in 1987, was renamed "January 14," though some had suggested it should honor Bouazizi (though a major roadway leading to the city's airport was renamed for him).<sup>[48]</sup> Bouazizi was posthumously awarded the 2011 Sakharov Prize as one of "five representatives of the Arab people, in recognition and support of their drive for freedom and human rights".<sup>[49]</sup> On 17 December, a cart statue was unveiled in Sidi Bouzid in honor of Bouazizi. Tunisia's first elected president Moncef Marzouki attended the ceremony, stating "Thank you to this land, which has been marginalised for centuries, for bringing dignity to the entire Tunisian people."<sup>[50]</sup> Also, in Sidi Bouzid, as well as in the capital city of Tunis, both cities' respective main streets were renamed, "Boulevard Mohamed Bouazizi".<sup>[51]</sup> The United Kingdom's *The Times* newspaper named Bouazizi person of the year for 2011.<sup>[52]</sup>

"By Fire," a story by Moroccan author Tahar Ben Jelloun inspired by<sup>[53]</sup> this incident, was published in *The New Yorker* edition of 16 September 2013.<sup>[54]</sup> A fictional treatment, some details in the story differ from the factual account. An interview with the author about his story (<http://www.newyorker.com/online/blogs/books/2013/09/this-week-in-fiction-tahar-ben-jelloun.html>) was posted to *The New Yorker's* "This Week in Fiction" on 9 September 2013.

## Copycat incidents

Bouazizi's actions triggered the Werther effect, causing a number of self-immolations in protests emulating Bouazizi's in several other countries in the Greater Middle East and Europe. In Algeria in particular, protests against rising food prices and spreading unemployment<sup>[55]</sup> have resulted in many self-immolations. The first reported case following Bouazizi's death was that of Mohsen Bouterfif, a 37-year-old father of two, who set himself on fire when the mayor of Boukhadra in Algeria refused to meet with him and others regarding employment and housing requests on 13 January 2011. According to a report in *El-Watan*, the mayor challenged him, saying if he had courage he would immolate himself by fire as Bouazizi had done.<sup>[56]</sup> He died on 24 January. Maamir Lotfi, a 36-year-old unemployed father of six, also denied a meeting with the governor, burned himself in front of the El Oued town hall on 17 January, dying on 12 February.<sup>[57]</sup> Abdelhafid Boudechicha, a 29-year-old day laborer who lived with his parents and five siblings, burned himself in Medjana on 28 January over employment and housing issues. He died the following day.<sup>[58]</sup>

In the six months immediately after Mohamed Bouazizi's death on 4 January 2011, at least 107 Tunisians tried to kill themselves by setting themselves on fire.<sup>[59]</sup> The men who self-immolated were mostly young unmarried men from poor, rural areas, and had only basic education.<sup>[59]</sup> Amenallah Messaadi, who collated the figures and



is head of the Burns Centre, said that people shouldn't glorify the act of self-immolation and "should stop adding fuel to the fire".<sup>[59]</sup>

In Israel, Moshe Silman set himself on fire during a social justice protests and died on 20 July 2012. In Egypt, Abdou Abdel-Moneim Jaafar, a 49-year-old restaurant owner, set himself alight in front of the Egyptian Parliament.<sup>[60]</sup> His act of protest helped instigate weeks of protest and, later, the resignation of Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak on 11 February 2011. In Saudi Arabia, an unidentified 65-year-old man died on 21 January 2011, after setting himself on fire in the town of Samtah, Jizan. This was apparently the kingdom's first known case of self-immolation.<sup>[61][62]</sup>

Although these cases, with the exception of Egypt, did not provoke the same kind of popular reaction that Bouazizi's case did in Tunisia, the Algerian, Yemeni, and Jordanian governments have experienced significant protests and made major concessions in response to them.<sup>[19]</sup> As such, these men and Bouazizi were hailed by some as "heroic martyrs of a new Middle Eastern revolution."<sup>[3]</sup>

The wave of copycat incidents reached Europe on 11 February 2011, in a case very similar to Bouazizi's. Nouredine Adnane, a 27-year-old Moroccan street vendor, set himself on fire in Palermo, Sicily, in protest of the confiscation of his wares and the harassment that was allegedly inflicted on him by municipal officials.<sup>[63]</sup> He died five days later.<sup>[64]</sup> In Amsterdam, Kambiz Roustay, a 36-year-old asylum seeker from Iran, set himself on fire on Dam Square in protest of being rejected asylum. Roustay had fled the country for publishing works undermining the regime, and feared being tortured by the Iranian regime upon his return.<sup>[65]</sup>

## See also

- 2011 Algerian self-immolations
- List of political self-immolations
- Thích Quảng Đức
- Romas Kalanta
- Jan Palach
- Ryszard Siwiec

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