

Middlebury students evade Egypt turmoil

By Andrea Suozzo | FEBRUARY 10, 2011



MIDDLEBURY STUDENTS WATCHED the Egyptian army roll into Alexandria on Jan. 29 as crowds protested President Hosni Mubarak's 30-year authoritarian rule. Tik Root, who was studying abroad in Alexandria, said that while the police had tried to quell the protests with rubber bullets and tear gas, the army was supportive of the protesters. Photo courtesy Tik Root

MIDDLEBURY — Early this week, far from the roar of protesters in Egypt's Tahrir Square, five students beginning their spring semester at Middlebury College were struggling to find ways to keep up on the historic events that, just two weeks ago, they were witnessing firsthand.

These five Middlebury students, as well as 17 from other colleges, were studying abroad at the C.V. Starr School in the Middle East, based in Alexandria, Egypt, and run by Middlebury College, when the anti-government protests began in late January. The students were evacuated early last week, but as of press time protesters were still filling Tahrir Square in Cairo and across the country with renewed vigor, marking the 15th straight day of protests against Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak's 30-year rule.

In the days before their evacuation, Tik Root, a Middlebury College student and Ripton native, and Robert Joyce, a Princeton University student, explored the city, documenting the city's uprising in photographs and video. The shots illuminate distant protesters set upon by the rattle of rubber bullets and clouds of tear gas, then the call to prayer echoing through barren streets in the twilight, and, the next day, crowds of men, women and children marching down the street alongside army tanks, chanting slogans of freedom.

"Friday (Jan. 28) was big for me," said Root a week later, reflecting on the moment when he knew he would likely have to leave the country. "I wasn't part of the mobs, but I was in the middle of the protests that kicked the police out of the city. We were in the street."

Root described watching people celebrating in the streets once the police had gone. One man passed by brandishing a pair of black boots, clearly those of a policeman.

"I think that was a wake-up call for me," he said. By that Friday, the dormitories where some of the men in the program were housed had closed down, and all of the male students had relocated to the apartment Root shared with another student.

That night, Root grabbed a length of PVC pipe to brandish and joined the neighborhood militia that formed to protect their street. They wore white, he said, so that they could distinguish each other from the thugs roaming the city. Meanwhile, the 11 women on the program were in a University of Alexandria dormitory.

Hafsa Ahmad, a Middlebury College junior from New Jersey, spent the days leading up to the group's evacuation on Jan. 31 in the nearly empty women's dorm with the other female students on the program and just a few Egyptian students — most students had already gone home to their families.

On the city streets, Ahmad said she was surprised by the quiet in the once bustling city. "There was complete silence," said Ahmad. "The streets were devoid of life. People were just waiting and waiting."

When the protesters passed by, Ahmad said, they were fairly calm, and people lined the street watching. "People on the side of the street were curious. It wasn't the fervor of the revolution — it wasn't violent," she said. Meanwhile, the University of Alexandria called off classes for the coming week,

and back in Vermont, movement was afoot to pull the students out of the country. Jeff Cason, dean of international programs at Middlebury, said that after closely monitoring the situation for several days, the administration in Vermont made the decision to pull the students late that Friday night.

On Saturday the army rolled into Alexandria, bringing a new atmosphere to the city — while the police forces are directly hired by the government, military service is mandatory for young men. Root was in the streets to watch protesters climb atop army vehicles in a show of solidarity.

Root said between protests, people stayed inside, glued to their televisions for the news. After watching Mubarak's refusal to capitulate on TV, he said he knew protests would continue.

Ahmad recalled a change in the group's morale during the nights that they spent waiting to evacuate. Looking out of the window one night, she saw a group of men involved in a melee around the corner with clubs and knives.

"It was men literally trying to kill each other," she said. "I've never seen that before." The women also learned on Saturday night that the security guards had fled the dormitory, so they gathered in one room, turned out the lights, turned on belly dancing music and tried to ignore the sounds of Molotov cocktails crashing and guns firing that broke out every so often.

And while Middlebury program director Nehad Heliel kept in contact with the students throughout the night, she was trapped in her own house and unable to help the students.

But there were redeeming moments, like the news that came over the phone from a neighbor down the street. "All of the men on our street had banded together and surrounded our dorm, even though we weren't their mothers or their daughters or their sisters," said Ahmad. "It was a beautiful thing in the midst of all this bloodshed."

Root recalled his surprise after a tense night, when in the morning people left their houses and returned to their everyday lives. "There were no police — every police station in the city was burned out and still smoking. The main government building in the city was burned out and still smoking, but people were going back to work. Ordinary people were directing traffic, collecting trash, sweeping the streets, doing what they had to do to keep things as normal as possible."

By Sunday afternoon, the program director had found a tour bus to take the students to the airport, where they waited more than 30 hours for a plane out of the country.

NOT ON CALL

Cason said that one of the difficulties the college faced was with On Call, the company hired by the college's travel insurance carrier to step in in case of political unrest. Due to a lack of communication, college officials decided to take out a separate contract with a Boston-based evacuation company, Global Rescue. "It was an insurance policy on our insurance policy," Cason said.

Global Rescue immediately chartered a plane from Prague — and since the On Call plane from Cairo never landed in Alexandria, Cason said the last-minute contract paid off. He did not specify how much the college had paid for the service.

"It was not cheap, for sure," he said. "But it was something that we decided was necessary." The students left Alexandria that Monday evening, Jan. 31, bound for Prague. A number of students from Butler University's study abroad program in the city also caught a ride on the charter flight.

Over the next few days, one program administrator stayed with the students until everyone could get a flight back home. The last student left Prague on Thursday, but Ahmad and Root both arrived home on Wednesday.

On Monday, the five students returned to Middlebury College for the start of the spring semester. Cason said most people who had been on the program — including Root — are still looking for a way to go back to the Middle East this semester, either to Morocco or to Syria.

But Ahmad said she won't be looking for a way to return just yet. "At this point in time, it's not practical, and not safe," she said. Instead, Ahmad is enjoying being back at Middlebury after a harrowing experience, "I'm so incredibly lucky, not just as an American citizen or a Middlebury College student, but as someone who has the means and the family and the support to be evacuated from a situation like that," she said.

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