

## OVERVIEW

**I**n a region where the repressed discontent of the masses has often been described as combustible, it is hard to think of a more apt beginning than Tunisia's to the revolutions that spread like wild-fire through Arab countries in the winter and spring of 2011. On December 17, 2010, Mohammed Bouazizi, a poor twenty-six-year-old fruit seller from the small city of Sidi Bouzid, doused himself in gasoline and lit himself aflame. Humiliated by police who had confiscated his fruits and harassed him for years—culminating, it was said, in a public slap from a policewoman—Bouazizi protested unaccountable power by sacrificing the only thing he had left: his own life and body.

His action immediately resonated in Tunisia and beyond, at least partly because Bouazizi personified the problems of his generation. He was young—27 percent of Tunisians are fifteen to twenty-nine, mirroring a youth bulge throughout North Africa and the Middle East. He was underemployed in a country where the official unemployment rate was 14 percent, and the reality—especially for youth—was much worse. He lacked meaningful opportunities—he dreamed of a university education but could never finish high school, instead struggling to support his family of eight with the pittance he made from his street vending.